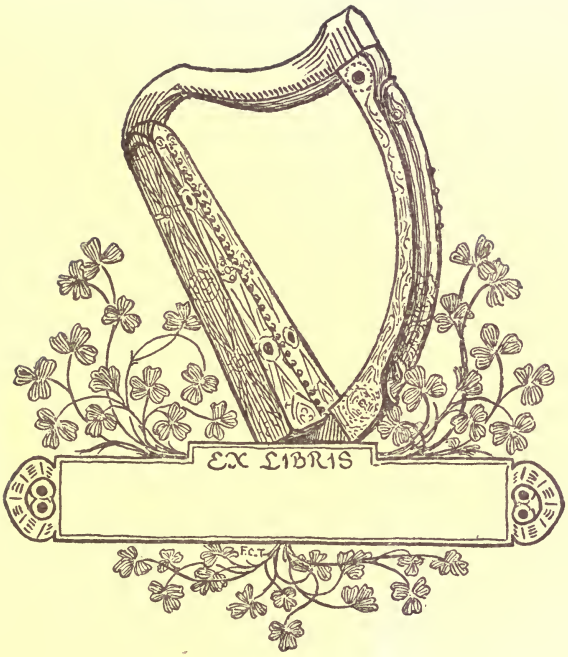
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THE

NOVELS

OF

MARIA EDGEWORTH

IN TWELVE VOLUMES

VOL. XII.

HELEN

VOL. II.

F C Tilney pinxt

"Breakfast . . . went on in absolute silence."

HELEN

BY

MARIA EDGEWORTH

VOL. II.

F C Tilney pinxt.

"She sank on the sofa, fell back, and became as pale as death."

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HELEN.

Chapter xxiv.

THERE is no better test of the strength of affection than the ready turning of the mind to the little concerns of a friend, when preoccupied with important interests of our own. This was a proof of friendship which Lady Davenant had lately given to Helen, for at the time when she had entered with so much readiness and zeal into Helen's little difficulties and debts, great political affairs and important interests of Lord Davenant's were in suspense, and pressed heavily upon her mind. What might be the nature of these political embarrassments had not been explained. Lady Davenant had only hinted at them. She said, "She knew from the terror exhibited by the inferior creatures in office that some change in administration was expected, as beasts are said to howl and tremble before storm, or earthquake, or any great convulsion of nature takes place."

Since Lady Davenant's return from town, where Lord Davenant still remained, nothing had been said of the embassy to Russia but that it was delayed. Lady Cecilia, who was quick, and, where she was

not herself concerned, usually right in interpreting the signs of her mother's discomfiture, guessed that Lord Davenant had been circumvented by some diplomatist of inferior talents, and she said to Helen, "When an ass kicks you never tell it, is a maxim which mamma heard from some friend, and she always acts upon it; but a kick, whether given by ass or not, leaves a bruise, which sometimes tells in spite of ourselves, and my mother should remember another maxim of that friend's, that the faults and follies of the great are the delight and comfort of the little. Now, my mother, though she is so well suited, from her superior abilities and strength of mind, and all that, to be the wife of a great political leader, yet in some respects she is the most unfit person upon earth for *the situation;* for, though she feels the necessity of conciliating, she cannot unbend with her inferiors, that is, with half the world. As Catalani said of singing, it is much more difficult to descend than to ascend well. Shockingly mamma shows in her manner sometimes how tired she is of the stupid, and how she despises the mean; and all the underlings think she can undo them with papa, for it has gone abroad that she *governs*, while in fact, though papa asks her advice, to be sure, because she is so wise, she never does interfere in the least; but, now it has once got into the world's obstinate head that she does, it cannot be put out again, and mamma is the last person upon earth to take her own part, or condescend to explain and set things right. She is always thinking of papa's glory and the good of the public, but the public will never thank him and much less her; so there she is a martyr, without her crown; now, if I were to make a martyr of myself, which, Heaven forbid! I would at least take right good care to secure my crown, and to have my full glory round my head, and set on becomingly. But seriously, my dear Helen,"

continued Lady Cecilia, "I am unhappy about papa and mamma, I assure you. I have seen little clouds of discontent long gathering, lowering, and blackening, and I know they will burst over their heads in some tremendous storm at last."

Helen hoped not, but looked frightened.

"Oh, you may hope not, my dear, but I know it will be—we may not hear the thunder, but we shall see the lightning all the more dangerous. We shall be struck down, unless——" she paused.

"Unless what?" said Helen.

"Unless the storm be dispersed in time."

"And how?"

"The lightning drawn off by some good conductor —such as myself; I am quite serious, and though you were angry with me for laughing just now, as if I was not the best of daughters, even though I laugh, I can tell you I am meditating an act of self-devotion for my mother's sake—a grand *coup d'état.*"

"*Coup d'état?* you, Cecilia! my dear——"

"I, Helen, little as you think of me."

"Of your political talents you don't expect me to think much, do you?"

"My political talents! you shall see what they are. I am capable of a grand *coup d'état.* I will have next week a three days' congress, anti-political, at Clarendon Park, where not a word of politics shall be heard, nor anything but nonsense if I can help it, and the result shall be, as you shall see, goodwill between all men and all women—women? yes, there's the grand point. Mamma has so affronted two ladies, very influential as they call it, each—Lady Masham, a favourite at court, and Lady Bearcroft, risen from the ranks, on her husband's shoulders; he 'a man of law,' Sir Benjamin Bearcroft, and very clever she is, I hear, but loud and coarse; absolutely inadmissible

she was thought till lately, and now, only tolerated for her husband's sake, but still have her here I must."

"I think you had better not," remonstrated Helen; "if she is so very vulgar, Lady Davenant and the general will never endure her."

"Oh, he will! the general will bear a great deal for mamma's sake, and more for papa's. I must have her, my dear, for the husband is of consequence and, though he is ashamed of her, for that very reason he cannot bear that anybody should neglect her, and terribly mamma has neglected her! Now, my dear Helen, do not say a word more against it." Very few words had Helen said. "I must ponder well," continued Cecilia, "and make out my list of worthies, my concordatum party."

Helen much advised the consulting Lady Davenant first; but Lady Cecilia feared her mother might be too proud to consent to any advance on her own part. Helen still feared that the bringing together such discordant people would never succeed, but Lady Cecilia, always happy in paying herself with words answerable to her wishes, replied, "That discords well managed often produced the finest harmony." The only point she feared was, that she should not gain the first step, that she should not be able to prevail upon the general to let her give the invitations. In truth, it required all her persuasive words, and more persuasive looks to accomplish this preliminary, and to bring General Clarendon to invite, or permit to be invited, to Clarendon Park, persons whom he knew but little, and liked not at all. But as Lady Cecilia pleaded and urged that it would soon be over, "the whole will be over in three days—only a three days' visit; and for mamma!—I am sure, Clarendon—you will do anything for her, and for papa, and your own Cecilia?"—the general smiled, and the notes were written, and the

invitations were accepted, and when once General Clarendon had consented, he was resolutely polite in his reception of these to him unwelcome guests. His manner was not false; it was only properly polite, not tending to deceive any one who understood the tokens of conventional good breeding. It however required considerable power over himself to keep the line of demarcation correctly, with one person in particular to whom he had a strong political aversion: Mr Harley. —His very name was abhorrent to General Clarendon, who usually designated him as "That Genius, Cecilia —that favourite of your mother's!"—while to Lady Davenant Mr Harley was the only person from whose presence she anticipated any pleasure, or who could make the rest of the party to her endurable.

Helen, though apprehensive of what might be the ultimate result of this congress, yet could not help rejoicing that she should now have an opportunity of seeing some of those who are usually considered "high as human veneration can look." It is easy, after one knows who is who, to determine that we should have found out the characteristic qualities and talents in each countenance. Lady Cecilia, however, would not tell Helen the names of the celebrated unknown who were assembled when they went into the drawing-room before dinner, and she endeavoured to guess from their conversation the different characters of the speakers; but only a few sentences were uttered, signifying nothing; snuff-boxes were presented, pinches taken and inclinations made with becoming reciprocity, but the physiognomy of a snuff-box Helen could not interpret, though Lavater asserts that everything in nature, even a cup of tea, has a physiognomy.

Dinner was announced, and the company paired off, seemingly not standing on the order of their going; yet all, especially as some were strangers, secretly mindful

of their honours, and they moved on in precedence just, and found themselves in places due at the dinner-table.

But Helen did not seem likely to obtain more insight into the characters of these great personages in the dining-room than she had done in the drawing-room. For it often happens that, when the most celebrated, and even the most intellectual persons are brought together expressly for the purpose of conversation, then it does not flow, but sinks to silence, and ends at last in the stagnation of utter stupidity. Each seems oppressed with the weight of his own reputation, and, in the pride of high celebrity, and the shyness, real or affected, of high rank, each fears to commit himself by a single word. People of opposite parties, when thrown together, cannot at once change the whole habit of their minds, nor without some effort refrain from that abuse of their opposites in which they are accustomed to indulge when they have it all to themselves. Now every subject seems laboured—for in the pedantry of party spirit no partisan will speak but in the slang or cant of his own craft. Knowledge is not only at one entrance, but at every entrance quite shut out, and even literature itself grows perilous, so that to be safe they must all be dumb.

Lady Cecilia Clarendon was little aware of what she undertook when she called together this heterogeneous assembly of uncongenials and dissimilars round her dinner-table. After she had in vain made what efforts she could, and, well skilled in throwing the ball of conversation, had thrown it again and again without rebound from either side, she felt that all was flat, and that the silence and the stupidity were absolutely invincible. Helen could scarcely believe, when she tried afterwards to recollect, that she had literally this day, during the whole of the first course, heard only the following sentences, which came out at long intervals

between each couple of questions and answers—or observations and acquiescences :—"We had a shower." —"Yes, I think so." "But very fine weather we have had."—"Only too hot."—"Quite." "The new buildings at Marblemore—are they getting on, my lord?"—"Do not know; did not come that way." "Whom have they now at Dunstanbury?" was the next question. Then in reply came slowly a list of fashionable names. "Sir John died worth a million, they say."—"Yes, a martyr to the gout." "Has Lady Rachel done anything for her eyes?"—"Gone to Brighton, I believe." "Has anything been heard of the North Pole expedition?"—Not a word." "Crockly has got a capital cook, and English too."—"English! eh?"—"English—yes." Lord Davenant hoped this English cook would, with the assistance of several of his brother *artistes* of the present day, redeem our country from one-half of the Abbé Gregoire's reproach. The abbé has said that England would be the finest country in the world, but that it wants two essentials, *sunshine* and *cooks*. "Good! Good! Very!" voices from different sides of the table pronounced; and there was silence again.

At the dessert, however, after the servants had withdrawn, most people began to talk a little to their next neighbours; but by this Helen profited not, for each pair spoke low, and those who were beside her on either hand were not disposed to talk; she was seated between Sir Benjamin Bearcroft and Mr Harley—Sir Benjamin the man of law, and Mr Harley the man of genius, each eminent in his kind; but he of law seemed to have nothing in him but law, of which he was very full. In Sir Benjamin's economy of human life it was a wholesome rule, which he practised invariably, to let his understanding sleep in company, that it might waken in the courts, and for his repose he needed not

what some great men have professed so much to like—"the pillow of a woman's mind." Helen did not much regret the silence of this great legal authority, but she was very sorry that the man of genius did not talk; she did not expect him to speak to her, but she wished to hear him converse with others. But something was the matter with him; from the moment he sat down to dinner Helen saw he seemed discomfited. He first put his hand across his eyes, then pressed his forehead: she feared he had a bad headache. The hand went next to his ear, with a shrinking, excruciating gesture: it must be the earache, thought Helen. Presently his jaws were pinched together; toothache perhaps. At last she detected the disturbing cause. Opposite to Mr Harley, and beside Lady Davenant, sat a person whom he could not endure; one, in the first place, of an opposite party, but that was nothing; a man who was, in Mr Harley's opinion, a disgrace to any party, and what could bring him here? They had had several battles in public, but had never before met in private society, and the aversion of Mr Harley seemed to increase inversely as the squares of the distance. Helen could not see in the object adequate cause for this antipathy: the gentleman looked civil, smiling, rather mean, and quite insignificant, and he really was as insignificant as he appeared—not of consequence in any point of view. He was not high in office, nor ambassador, nor *chargé-d'affaires*; not certain that he was an *attaché* even, but he was said to have the ear of *somebody*, and was reputed to be secretly employed in diplomatic transactions of equivocal character; disclaimed, but used, by his superiors, and courted by his timid inferiors, whom he had persuaded of his great influence *somewhere*. Lady Cecilia had been assured, from good authority, that he was one who ought to be propitiated on her father's account, but now, when she

perceived what sort of a creature he was, sorely did she repent that he had been invited; and her mother, by whom he sat, seemed quite oppressed and nauseated.

So ended the dinner. And, as Lady Cecilia passed the general in going out of the room, she looked her contrition, her acknowledgment that he was perfectly right in his prophecy that it would never do.

Chapter xxv.

IT was rather worse when the ladies were by themselves. Some of the party were personally strangers to Lady Davenant; all had heard of her sufficiently; most had formed a formidable and false opinion of her. Helen was quite astonished at the awe her ladyship inspired in strangers. Lady Davenant's appearance and manner at this moment were not, indeed, calculated to dispel this dread. She was unusually distant and haughty, from a mistaken sort of moral pride. Aware that some of the persons now before her had, in various ways, by their own or their husbands' means, power to serve or to injure Lord Davenant, she disdained to propitiate them by the slightest condescension.

But how any persons in England—in London—could be strangers to Lady Davenant, was, to a foreign lady who was present, matter of inexpressible surprise. She could not understand how the wives of persons high in political life, some of opposite, but some of the same parties, should often be personally strangers to each other. Foreigners are, on first coming to England, apt to imagine that all who act together in public life must be of the same private society; while, on the contrary, it often happens that the ladies especially of the same

party are in different grades of fashion—moving in different orbits. The number of different circles and orbits in London is, indeed, astonishing to strangers, and the manner in which, though touching at tangents, these keep each their own path, attracted and repelled, or mutually influential, is to those who have not seen and studied the planisphere, absolutely incomprehensible. And, as she pondered on this difficulty, the ambassadress, all foreigner as she was, and all unused to silence, spoke not, and no one spoke: and nought was heard but the cup on the saucer, or the spoon in the cup, or the buzzing of a fly in the window.

In the midst of this awful calm it was that Lady Bearcroft blurted out with loud voice—"Amazing entertaining we are! so many clever people got together, too, for what?" It was worth while to have seen Lady Masham's face at that moment! Lady Bearcroft saw it, and, fearing no mortal, struck with the comic of that look of Lady Masham's, burst into laughter uncontrolled, and the contrast of dignity and gravity in Lady Davenant only made her laugh the more, till out of the room at last she ran. Lady Masham all the while, of course, never betrayed the slightest idea that she could by any possibility have been the object of Lady Bearcroft's mirth. But Lady Davenant—how did she take it? To her daughter's infinite relief, quite quietly; she looked rather amused than displeased. She bore with Lady Bearcroft, altogether, better than could have been expected; because she considered her only as a person unfortunately out of her place in society, and, without any fault of her own, dragged up from below to a height of situation for which nature had never intended, and neither art nor education had ever prepared her; whose faults and deficiencies were thus brought into the flash of day at once, before the malice of party and the fastidiousness of fashion, which knows

not to distinguish between *manque d'esprit*, and *manque d'usage*.

Not so Lady Davenant: she made liberal and philosophic allowance for even those faults of manner which were most glaring, and she further suspected that Lady Bearcroft purposely exaggerated her own vulgarity, partly for diversion, partly to make people stare, and partly to prevent their seeing what was habitual, and what involuntary, by hiding the bounds of reality. Of this Lady Masham had not the most distant conception; on the contrary, she was now prepared to tell a variety of odd anecdotes of Lady Bearcroft. She had seen, she said, this extraordinary person before, but had never met her in society, and delighted she was unexpectedly to find her here—"quite a treat." Such characters are indeed seldom met with at a certain height in the atmosphere of society, and such were peculiarly and justly Lady Masham's delight, for they relieved and at the same time fed a sense of superiority insufficient to itself. Such a person is fair, privileged, safe game, and Lady Masham began, as does a reviewer determined to be especially severe, with a bit of praise.

"Really very handsome, Lady Bearcroft must have been! Yes, as you say, Lady Cecilia, she is not out of blow yet certainly, only too full-blown rather for some tastes—fortunately not for Sir Benjamin; he married her, you know, long ago, for her beauty; she is a very correct person—always was; but they do repeat the strangest things she says—so very odd! and they tell such curious stories, too, of the things she does." Lady Masham then detailed a variety of anecdotes, which related chiefly to Lady Bearcroft's household cares, which never could she with haste despatch; then came stories of her cheap magnificence and extraordinary toilette expedients. "I own," continued Lady Masham, "that I always thought the

descriptions I heard must be exaggerated; but one is compelled to acknowledge that there is here in reality a terrible want of tact. Poor Sir Benjamin! I quite pity him, he must so see it! Though not of the first water himself, yet still he must feel, when he sees Lady Bearcroft with other people! He has feeling, though nobody would guess it from his look, and he shows it too, I am told; sadly annoyed he is sometimes by her *malapropoisms*. One day, she at one end of the table and he at the other, her ladyship, in her loud voice, called out to him, 'Sir Benjamin! Sir Benjamin! this is our wedding-day!' He, poor man, did not hear; she called out again louder, 'Sir Benjamin, my dear, this day fifteen years ago you and I were married!' 'Well, my dear,' he answered, 'well, my dear, how can I possibly help that now!'"

Pleased with the success of this anecdote, which raised a general smile, Lady Masham vouched for its perfect correctness, "she had it from one, who heard it from a person who was actully present at the time it happened." Lady Davenant had not the least doubt of the correctness of the story, but she believed the names of the parties were different; she had heard it years ago of another person. It often happens, as she observed, to those who make themselves notoriously ridiculous, as to those who become famous for wit, that all good things in their kinds are attributed to them; though the one may have no claim to half the witticisms, and the other may not be responsible for half the absurdities for which they have the reputation. It required all Lady Masham's politeness to look pleased, and all her candour to be quite happy to be set right as to that last anecdote. But many she had heard of Lady Bearcroft were really incredible. "Yet one would almost believe anything of her." While she was yet speaking, Lady Bearcroft returned, and her malicious

enemy, leaning back in her chair as if in expectation of the piece beginning, waited for her puppet to play or be played off.

All this time Lady Cecilia was not at ease; she, well aware what her mother would feel, and had felt, while Lady Masham was going on with this gossip-talk, had stood between her ladyship and Lady Davenant, and, as Lady Masham did not speak much above her breath, Cecilia had for some time flattered herself that her laudable endeavours to intercept the sound, or to prevent the sense from reaching her mother's ear, had succeeded, especially as she had made as many exclamations as she could of "Really!" "Indeed!" "How extraordinary!" "You do not say so?" which, as she pronounced them, might have excited the curiosity of commonplace people, but which she knew would in her mother's mind deaden all desire to listen. However, Lady Masham had raised her voice, and from time to time had stretched her neck of snow beyond Lady Cecilia's intercepting drapery, so as actually to claim Lady Davenant's attention. The consequences her daughter heard and felt. She heard the tap, tap, tap of the ivory folding-knife upon the table; and well interpreting, she knew, even before she saw her mother's countenance, that Lady Masham had undone herself, and, what was of much more consequence, had destroyed all chance of accomplishing that reconciliation with "mamma," that projected coalition which was to have been of such ultimate advantage to "papa."

Notwithstanding Lady Bearcroft's want of knowledge of the great world, she had considerable knowledge of human nature, which stood her wonderfully in stead. She had no notion of being made sport of for the *élégantes*, and, with all Lady Masham's plausibility of persiflage, she never obtained her end, and never

elicited anything really absurd by all attempts to draw her out—out she would not be drawn. After an unconquerable silence and all the semblance of dead stupidity, Lady Bearcroft suddenly showed signs of life, however, and she, all at once, began to talk—to Helen of all people!—And why?—because she had taken, in her own phrase, a monstrous fancy to Miss Stanley; she was not sure of her name, but she knew she liked her nature, and it would be a pity that her reason should not be known, and, in the words in which she told it to Lady Cecilia, "Now I will just tell you why I have taken such a monstrous fancy to your friend here, Miss Hanley——"

"Miss Stanley—give me leave to mention," said Lady Cecilia. "Let me introduce you regularly."

"Oh! by no means; don't trouble yourself now, Lady Cecilia, for I hate regular introductions. But, as I was going to tell you how, before dinner to-day, as I came down the great staircase, I had an uncommon large, big, and, for aught I know, yellow corking-pin, which that most careless of all careless maids of mine—a good girl, too—had left sticking point foremost out of some part of me. Miss Hanley—Stanley (beg pardon) was behind, and luckily saw and stopped. Out she pulled it, begging my pardon; so kindly too, I only felt the twitch on my sleeve, and turned, and loved the first sight I had of that pretty face, which need never blush, I am sure, though it's very becoming the blush too. So good-natured, you know, Lady Cecilia, it was when nobody was looking, and before anybody was the wiser. Not like some young ladies, or old even, that would have *showed one up*, rather than help one out in any pin's point of a difficulty."

Lady Cecilia herself was included in Lady Bearcroft's good graces, for she liked that winning way,

and saw there was a real good-nature there, too. She opened to both friends cordially, *à propos* to some *love* of a lace trimming. Of lace she was a famous judge, and she went into details of her own good bargains, with histories of her expeditions into the extremity of the city in search of cheap goods and unheard of wonders at prime cost, in regions unknown. She told how it was her clever way to leave her carriage and her *people*, and go herself down narrow streets and alleys, where only wheelbarrows and herself could go; she boasted of her feats in diving into dark dens in search of run goods, charming things—French warranted—that could be had for next to nothing, and, in exemplification, showed the fineness of her embroidered cambric handkerchiefs, and told their price to a farthing!

Lady Masham's "Wonderful!" was worthy of any Jesuit, male or female, that ever existed.

From her amazing bargains, the lady of the law-knight went on to smuggling; and, as she got into spirits, talking loudly, she told of some amber satin, a whole piece capitally got over in an old gentleman's "Last Will and Testament," tied up with red tape so nicely, and sealed and superscribed and all, got through untouched! "But a better thing I did myself," continued she; "the last trip I made to Paris —coming back, I set at defiance all the searchers and *stabbers*, and custom-house officers of both nations. I had hundreds of pounds worth of Valenciennes and Brussels lace hid—you would never guess where. I never told a servant—not a mortal maid even; that's the only way; had only a confidante of a coachmaker. But when it came to packing-up time, my own maid smelt out the lace was missing; and gave notice, I am confident, to the custom-house people to search me. So much the more glory to me. I got off clear; and,

when they had stabbed the cushions, and torn the inside of my carriage all to pieces, I very coolly made them repair the mischief at their own cost. Oh, I love to do things bravely! and away I drove triumphant with the lace, well stuffed, packed, and covered within the pole leather of the carriage they had been searching all the time."

At this period of her narrative the gentlemen came into the drawing-room. "But here comes Sir Benjamin! mum, mum! not a word more for my life! You understand, Lady Cecilia! husbands must be minded. And let me whisper a favour—a whist-party I must beg; nothing keeps Sir Ben in good-humour so certainly as whist—when he wins, I mean."

The whist-party was made, and Lady Cecilia took care that Sir Benjamin should win, while she lost with the best grace possible. By her conciliating manners and good management in dividing to govern, all parties were arranged to general satisfaction. Mr Harley's antipathy, the *attaché*, she settled at écarté with Lady Masham, who found him "quite a well-mannered, pleasant person." Lady Cecilia explained to Mr Harley, that it was her fault—her mistake entirely —that this person had been invited. Mr Harley was now himself again, and happy in conversation with Lady Davenant, beside whom he found his place on the sofa.

After Helen had done her duty at harp and pianoforte, Cecilia relieved her, and whispered that she might now go to her mother's sofa, and rest and be happy. "Mamma's work is in some puzzle, Helen; you must go and set it to rights, my dear." Lady Davenant welcomed her with a smile, made room for her on the sofa, and made over to her the tambour-frame; and now that Helen saw and heard Mr Harley in his natural state, she could scarcely believe that he

was the same person who had sat beside her at dinner. Animated and delightful he was now, and, what she particularly liked in him, there was no display—nothing in the Churchill style. Whenever any one came near, and seemed to wish to hear or speak, Mr Harley not only gave them fair play, but helped them in their play. Helen observed that he possessed the art which she had often remarked in Lord Davenant, peculiar to good-natured genius—the art of drawing something good out of everybody; sometimes more than they knew they had in them till it was brought out. Even from Lord Masham, insipid and soulless though he was, as any courtier lord-in-waiting could be, something was extracted: Lord Masham, universally believed to have nothing in him, was this evening surprisingly entertaining. He gave Lady Davenant a description of what he had been so fortunate as to see—the first public dinner of the King of France on his restoration, served according to all the *ci-devant* ceremonials, and in the etiquette of Louis the Fourteenth's time. Lord Masham represented in a lively manner the Marquis de Dreux, in all his antiquarian glory, going through the whole form prescribed: first, knocking with his cane at the door; then followed by three guards with shouldered carbines, marching to buttery and hall, each and every officer of the household making reverential obeisance as they passed to the *Nef*—the *Nef* being, as Lord Masham explained to Miss Stanley, a piece of gilt plate in the shape of the hull of a ship, in which the napkins for the king's table are kept. "But why the hull of a ship should be appropriated to the royal napkins?" was asked. Lord Masham confessed that this was beyond him, but he looked amazingly considerate—delicately rubbed his polished forehead with the second finger of the right hand, then regarded his ring, and turned it thrice slowly round, but the

talismanic action produced nothing, and he received timely relief by a new turn given to the conversation, in which he was not, he thought, called upon to take any share—the question indeed appeared to him irrelevant, and retiring to the card-table, he "left the discussion to abler heads."

The question was, why bow to the Nef at all?—This led to a discussion upon the advantages of ceremonials in preserving respect for order and reverence for authority, and then came an inquiry into the abuses of this real good. It was observed that the signs of the times should always be consulted, and should guide us in these things.—How far? was next to be considered. All agreed on the principle that "order is Heaven's first law," yet there were in the application strong shades of difference between those who took part in the conversation. On one side, it was thought that overturning the *tabouret* at the court of France had been the signal for the overthrow of the throne; while, on the other hand, it was suggested that a rigid adherence to forms unsuited to the temper of the times only exasperates, and that, wherever reliance on forms is implicit, it is apt to lead princes and their counsellors to depend too much on the strength of that fence which, existing only in the imagination, is powerless when the fashion changes. In a court quite surrounded and enveloped by old forms, the light of day cannot penetrate to the interior of the palace, the eyes long kept in obscurity are weakened, so that light cannot be borne: when suddenly it breaks in, the royal captive is bewildered, and if obliged to act, he gropes, blunders, injures himself, and becomes incapable of decision in extremity of danger, reduced to the helplessness which marks the condition of the Eastern despot, or *les rois fainéans* of any time or country.

As Helen sat by, listening to this conversation,

what struck and interested her most was, the manner in which it went on and went off without leading to any unpleasant consequences, notwithstanding the various shades of opinion between the parties. This she saw depended much on the good sense and talents, but far more on the good breeding and temper of those who spoke and those who listened. Time in the first place was allowed and taken for each to be understood, and no one was urged by exclamation, or misconception, or contradiction, to say more than just the thing he thought.

Lady Cecilia, who had now joined the party, was a little in pain when she heard Louis the Fourteenth's love for punctuality alluded to. She dreaded, when the general quoted "Punctuality is the virtue of princes," that Mr Harley, with the usual impatience of genius, would have ridiculed so antiquated a notion; but, to Lady Cecilia's surprise, he even took the part of punctuality: in a very edifying manner he distinguished it from mere ceremonial etiquette—the ceremonial of the German courts, where "they lose time at breakfast, at dinner, at supper; at court, in the antechamber, on the stairs, everywhere;"—punctuality was, he thought, a habit worthy to be ranked with the virtues, by its effects upon the mind, the power it demands and gives of self-control, raising in us a daily, hourly sense of duty, of something that ought, that must be done, one of the best habits human creatures can have, either for their own sake or the sake of those with whom they live. And to kings and courtiers more particularly, because it gives the idea of stability—of duration; and to the aged, because it gives a sort of belief that life will last for ever. The general had often thought this, but said he had never heard it so well expressed; he afterwards acknowledged to Cecilia that he found Mr Harley was quite a different person

from what he had expected—"He has good sense, as well as genius and good breeding. I am glad, my dear Cecilia, that you asked him here." This was a great triumph.

Towards the close of the evening, when mortals are beginning to think of bed-chamber candles, Lady Cecilia looked at the *écarté* table, and said to her mother, "How happy they are, and how comfortable we are! a card-table is really a necessary of life—not even music is more universally useful." Mr Harley said, "I doubt," and then arose between Lady Davenant and him an argument upon the comparative power in modern society of music and cards. Mr Harley took the side of music, but Lady Davenant inclined to think that cards, in their day, and their day is not over yet, have had a wider range of influence. "Nothing like that happy board of green cloth; it brings all intellects to one level," she said. Mr Harley pleaded the cause of music, which, he said, hushes all passions, calms even despair. Lady Davenant urged the silent superiority of cards, which rests the weary talker, and relieves the perplexed courtier, and, in support of her opinion, she mentioned an old ingenious essay on cards and tea, by Pinto, she thought; and she begged that Helen would some time look for it in the library. Helen went that instant. She searched, but could not find; where it ought to have been, there it of course was not. While she was still on the book-ladder, the door opened, and enter Lady Bearcroft.

"Miss Hanley!" cried she, "I have a word to say to you, for, though you are a stranger to me, I see you are a dear good creature, and I think I may take the liberty of asking your advice in a little matter."

Helen, who had by this time descended from the steps, stood and looked a little surprised, but said all that was

properly civil, "gratified by Lady Bearcroft's good opinion—happy to be of any service,"—&c. &c.

"Well, then—sit ye down one instant, Miss Hanley." Helen suggested that her name was Stanley.

"Stanley!—eh?—Yes, I remember. But I want to consult you, since you are so kind to allow me, on a little matter—but do sit down, I never can talk of business standing. Now I just want you, my dear Miss Hanley, to do a little job for me with Lady Davenant, who, with half an eye I can see, is a great friend of yours—Arn't I right?"

Helen said Lady Davenant was indeed a very kind friend of hers, but still what it could be in which Lady Bearcroft expected her assistance she could not imagine.

"You need not be frightened at the word job; if that is what alarms you," continued Lady Bearcroft, "put your heart at ease, there is nothing of that sort here. It is only a compliment that I want to make, and nothing in the world expected in return for it—as it is a return in itself. But in the first place look at this cover." She produced the envelope of a letter. "Is this Lady Davenant's handwriting, think you?" She pointed to the word "*Mis-sent*," written on the corner of the cover. Helen said it was Lady Davenant's writing. "You are certain?—Well, that is odd!—Mis-sent! when it was directed to herself, and nobody else on earth, as you see as plain as possible—Countess Davenant, surely that is right enough?" Then opening a red morocco case, she showed a magnificent diamond Sevigné. "Observe now," she continued, "these diamonds are so big, my dear Miss Hanley—Stanley, they would have been quite out of my reach, only for that late French invention, which may be you may not have heard of, nor should I, but for the hint of a friend at Paris, who is in the jewellery line.

The French, you must know, have got the art of sticking small di'monds together so as to make little worthless ones into large, so that, as you see, you would never tell the difference; and as it was a new discovery, and something ingenious and scientific, and Lady Davenant being reported to be a scientific lady, as well as political and influential, and all that, I thought it a good opportunity, and a fine excuse for paying her a compliment, which I had long wished to pay, for she was once on a time very kind to Sir Ben, and got him appointed to his present station; and though Lord Davenant was the ostensible person, I considered her as the prime mover behind the curtain. Accordingly, I sat me down, and wrote as pretty a note as I could pen, and Sir Ben approved of the whole thing; but I don't say that I'm positive he was as off-handed and clean-hearted in the matter as I was, for between you and I his gratitude, as they say of some people's, is apt to squint with one eye to the future as well as one to the past—you comprehend?"

Helen was not clear that she comprehended all that had been said; still less had she any idea what she could have to do in this matter; she waited for further explanation.

"Now all I want from you then, Miss Hanley—Stanley I would say, I beg pardon, I'm the worst at proper names that lives—but all I want of you, Miss Hanley, is—first, your opinion as to the validity of the handwriting—well, you are positive, then, that this *mis-sent* is her hand. Now then, I want to know, do you think Lady Davenant knew what she was about when she wrote it?"

Helen's eyes opened to their utmost power of distension, at the idea of anybody's questioning that Lady Davenant knew what she was about.

"La! my dear," said Lady Bearcroft; "spare the

whites of your eyes, I didn't mean she didn't know what she was about in *that* sense."

"What sense?" said Helen.

"Not in any particular sense," replied Lady Bearcroft. "But let me go on, or we shall never come to an understanding; I only meant that her ladyship might have just sat down to answer my note, as I often do myself, without having read the whole through, or before I have taken it in quite."

Helen thought this very unlikely to have happened with Lady Davenant.

"But still it might have happened," continued Lady Bearcroft, "that her ladyship did not notice the delicacy of the way in which the thing was *put*—for it really was put so that nobody could take hold of it against any of us—you understand; and after all, such a curiosity of a Sevigné as this, and such fine 'di'monds,' was too pretty, and too good a thing to be refused hand-over-head, in that way. Besides, my note was so respectable, and respectful, it surely required and demanded something more of an answer, methinks, from a person of birth or education, than the single bald word 'mis-sent,' like the postman! Surely, Miss Hanley, now, putting your friendship apart, candidly you must think as I do? And, whether or no, at least you will be so obliging to do me the favour to find out from Lady Davenant if she really made the reply with her eyes open or not, and really meant what she said."

Helen being quite clear that Lady Davenant always meant what she said, and had written with her eyes open, declined, as perfectly useless, making the proposed inquiry. It was plain that Lady Davenant had not thought proper to accept of this present, and to avoid any unpleasant explanations, had presumed it was not intended for her, but had been sent by mistake. Helen advised her to let the matter rest.

"Well, well!" said Lady Bearcroft, "thank you, Miss Hanley, at all events, for your good advice. But, neck or nothing, I am apt to go through with whatever I once take into my head, and, since you cannot aid and abet, I will trouble you no further, only not to say a word of what I have mentioned. But all the time I thank you, my dear young lady, as much as if I took your dictum. So, my dear Miss Hanley—Stanley—do not let me interrupt you longer in your book-hunt. Take care of that step-ladder, though; it is *coggledy*, as I observed when you came down—Good night, good night."

Chapter xxvi.

"MY dear Helen, there is an end of everything!" cried Lady Cecilia, the next day, bursting into Helen's room, and standing before her with an air of consternation. "What has brought things to this sad pass, I know not," continued she, "for, but an hour before, I left everybody in good humour with themselves—all in good train. But now——"

"What?" said Helen, "for you have not given me the least idea of what has happened."

"Because I have not the least idea myself, my dear. All I know is, that something has gone wrong, dreadfully! between my mother and Lady Bearcroft. Mamma would not tell me what it is; but her indignation is at such a height she declares she will not see that *woman* again:—positively will not come forth from her chamber as long as Lady Bearcroft remains in the house. So there is a total break-up—and I wish I had never meddled with anything. Oh, that I had never brought together these unsuita-

bilities, these incompatibilities! O Helen, what shall I do?"

Quite pale, Lady Cecilia stood, really in despair; and Helen did not know what to advise.

"Do you know anything about it, Helen, for you look as if you did?"

An abrupt knock at the door interrupted them, and, without waiting for permission, in came Lady Bearcroft, as if blown by a high wind, looking very red: half angry, half frightened, and then laughing, she exclaimed—"A fine *boggle-de-botch* I have made of it!" But seeing Lady Cecilia, she stopped short—"Beg pardon—thought you were by yourself, Miss Hanley."

Lady Cecilia instantly offered to retire, yet intimated, as she moved towards the door, a wish to stay, and, if it were not too much, to ask what was meant by——

"By *boggle-de-botch*, do you mean?" said Lady Bearcroft. "I am aware it is not a canonical word—classical, I mean; nor in nor out of any dictionary, perhaps—but when people are warm, they cannot stand picking terms."

"Certainly not," said Lady Cecilia; "but what is the matter? I am sorry anything unpleasant has occurred."

"Unpleasant indeed!" cried Lady Bearcroft; "I have been treated actually like a dog, while paying a compliment too, and a very handsome compliment, beyond contradiction. Judge for yourself, Lady Cecilia, if this Sevigné is to be *sneezed at?*"

She opened the case; Lady Cecilia said the diamonds were certainly very handsome, but——

"But!" repeated Lady Bearcroft, "I grant you there may be a but to everything in life; still it might be said civilly, as you say it, Lady Cecilia, or looked

civilly, as you look it, Miss Hanley: and if that had been done, instead of being affronted, I might after all have been well enough pleased to pocket my diamonds; but nobody can without compunction pocket an affront."

Lady Cecilia was sure her mother could not mean any affront.

"Oh, I do not know what she could or could not mean; but I will tell you what she did—all but threw the diamonds in my face."

"Impossible!" cried Helen.

"Possible—and I will show you how, Miss Hanley. This way: just shut down the case—snap!—and across the table she threw it, just as you would deal a card in a passion, only with a Mrs Siddons' air to boot. I beg your pardons, both ladies, for mimicking your friend and your parent, but flesh and blood could not stand that sort of style, you know, and a little wholesome mimicry breaks no bones, and is not very offensive, I hope?" The mimicry could not indeed be very offensive, for the imitation was so utterly unlike the reality, that Lady Cecilia and Helen with difficulty repressed their smiles. "Ladies may smile, but they would smile on the wrong sides of their pretty little mouths if they had been treated as I have been —so ignominiously. I am sure I wish I had taken your advice, Miss Hanley; but the fact was, last night I did not quite believe you: I thought you were only saying the best you could to set off a friend; for, since I have been among the great, and indeed even when I lived with the little, I have met with so many fair copies of false countenances, that I could not help suspecting there might be something of that sort with your Lady Davenant; but I am entirely convinced all you told me is true, for I peeped quite close at her, lifted up the hood, and found there were not two faces under it—only one very angry one for my pains. But

I declare I would rather see that than a double one, like my Lady Masham's, with her spermaceti smile. And after all, do you know," continued Lady Bearcroft, in a right vulgarly-cordial tone—"Do you know now, really, the first anger over, I like Lady Davenant —I protest and vow, even her pride I like—it well became her—birth and all, for I hear she is straight from Charlemagne! But I was going to mention, now my recollection is coming to me, that when I began talking to her ladyship of Sir Ben's gratitude about that place she got for him, she cut me short with her queer look, and said she was sure that Lord Davenant (and if he had been the king himself, instead of only her husband, and your father, Lady Cecilia, she could not have pronounced his name with more distinction)—she was sure, she said, that Lord Davenant would not have been instrumental in obtaining that place for Sir Benjamin Bearcroft if he had known any man more worthy of it, which indeed I did not think at the time over and above civil—for where, then, was the particular compliment to Sir Ben?"

But when Lady Bearcroft saw Lady Cecilia's anxiety and real distress at her mother's indignant resolution, she, with surprising good-humour, said—"I wish I could settle it for you, my dear. I cannot go away directly, which would be the best move, because Sir Benjamin has business here to-day with Lord Davenant—some job of his own, which must take place of any movements of mine, he being the more worthy gender. But I will tell you what I can do, and will, and welcome. I will keep my room instead of your mother keeping hers; so you may run and tell Lady Davenant that she is a prisoner at large, with the range of the whole house, without any danger of meeting me, for I shall not stir till the carriage is at the door

to-morrow morning, when she will not be up, for we will have it at six. I will tell Sir Benjamin, he is in a hurry back to town, and he always is. So all is right on my part. And go you to your mother, my dear Lady Cecilia, and settle her. I am glad to see you smile again; it is a pity you should ever do anything else."

It was not long before Cecilia returned, proclaiming, "Peace, peace!" She had made such an amusing report to her mother of all that Lady Bearcroft had said and done, and purposed to do, that Lady Davenant could not help seeing the whole in a ludicrous light, felt at once that it was beneath her serious notice, and that it would be unbecoming to waste indignation upon such a person. The result was, that she commissioned Helen to release Lady Bearcroft as soon as convenient, and to inform her that an act of oblivion was passed over the whole transaction.

There had been a shower, and it had cleared up. Lady Cecilia thought the sky looked bluer, and birds sang sweeter, and the air felt pleasanter than before the storm. "Nothing like a storm," said she, "for clearing the air; nothing like a little honest hurricane. But with Lady Masham there never is anything like a little honest hurricane. It is all still and close with an indescribable volcano-like feeling; one is not sure of what one is standing upon. Do you know, Helen," continued she, "I am quite afraid of some explosion between mamma and Lady Masham. If we came to any difficulty with her, we could not get out of it quite so well as with Lady Bearcroft, for there is no resource of heart or frankness of feeling with her. Before we all meet at dinner, I must sound mamma, and see if all is tolerably safe." And when she went this day at dressing-time with a bouquet, as was her custom, for her mother, she took Helen with her.

At the first hint of Lady Cecilia's fears, that Lady Masham could do her any mischief, Lady Davenant smiled in scorn. "The will she may have, my dear, but she has not the power."

"She is very foolish, to be sure," said Lady Cecilia; "still she might do mischief, and there is something monstrously treacherous in that smile of hers."

"Monstrously!" repeated Lady Davenant. "No, no, my dear Cecilia; nothing monstrous. Leave to Lady Bearcroft the vulgar belief in court-bred monsters; we know there are no such things. Men and women there, as everywhere else, are what nature, education, and circumstances have made them. Once an age, once in half-a-dozen ages, nature may make a Brinvilliers, or art allow of a Zeluco; but, in general, monsters are mere fabulous creatures—mistakes often, from bad drawings, like the unicorn."

"Yes, mamma, yes; now I feel much more comfortable. The unicorn has convinced me," said Lady Cecilia, laughing and singing

"'Tis all a mere fable; there's nothing to fear.'

And I shall think of her henceforth as nothing but what she appears to be, a well-dressed, well-bred, fine lady. Ay—every inch a fine lady; every word, look, motion, thought, suited to that *metier*."

"That vocation," said Lady Davenant; "it is above a trade; with her it really is a sacred duty, not merely a pleasure, to be fine. She is a fine lady of the first order; nothing too professional in her manner—no obvious affectation, for affectation in her was so early wrought into habit as to have become second nature, scarcely distinguishable from real—all easy."

"Just so, mamma; one gets on so easy with her."

"A curious illusion," continued Lady Davenant, "occurs with every one making acquaintance with such

persons as Lady Masham, I have observed; perhaps it is that some sensation of a treadmill life she leads, communicates itself to those she is talking to; which makes you fancy you are always getting on, but you never do get beyond a certain point."

"That is exactly what I feel," said Helen, "while Lady Masham speaks, or while she listens, I almost wonder how she ever existed without me."

"Yes, and though one knows it is all an illusion," said Lady Cecilia, "still one is pleased, knowing all the time that she cannot possibly care for one in the least; but then one does not expect everybody to care for one really; at least I know I cannot like all my acquaintance as much as my friends, much less can I love all my neighbours as myself——"

"Come, come! Cecilia!" said her mother.

"By 'come, come!' mamma means, don't go any further, Cecilia," said she, turning to Helen. "But now, mamma, I am not clear whether you really think her your friend or your enemy, inclined to do you mischief or not. Just as it may be for her interest or not, I suppose."

"And just as it may be the fashion or not," said Lady Davenant. "I remember hearing old Lady M****, one of the cleverest women of the last century, and one who had seen much of the world, say, 'If it was the fashion to burn me, and I at the stake, I hardly know ten persons of my acquaintance who would refuse to throw on a faggot.'"

"O mamma! — O Lady Davenant!" exclaimed Helen and Cecilia.

"It was a strong way of putting the matter," said Lady Davenant, laughing; "but fashion has, I assure you, more influence over weak minds, such as Lady Masham's, than either party or interest. And since you do not like my illustration by fire, take one by

water.—She is just a person to go out with, on a party of pleasure, on the smooth surface of a summer sea, and if a slight shower comes on would pity your bonnet sincerely, but if a serious squall arose and all should be in danger——"

"Then, of course, everybody would take care of themselves," interrupted Lady Cecilia, "excepting such a simpleton as Helen, who would take care of you first, mamma, of me next, and of herself last."

"I believe it—I do believe it," cried Lady Davenant, and, her eyes and thoughts fixing upon Helen, she quite forgot what further she was going to say of Lady Masham.

The perfectly unimpassioned tone in which her mother had discussed this lady's character, even the candour, convinced Lady Cecilia, as well as Helen, that nothing further could be done as to drawing them together. No condescension of manner, no conciliation, could be expected from Lady Davenant towards Lady Masham, but at the same time there was no fear of any rupture. And to this humble consolation was Lady Cecilia brought. She told Helen that she gave up all hope of doing any good, she would now be quite content if she avoided doing harm, and if this visit ended without coming to any further outrage on the part of Lady Bearcroft, and without her mother's being *guilty of contempt* to Lady Masham. She had done some little service, however, with respect to the ambassadress, and her mother knew it. It was well known that the ambassadress governed the ambassador, and Lady Cecilia had quite won her heart, "so that he will be assuredly a friend to papa. Indeed, this has been almost promised. Madame l'Ambassadrice assured me that her husband looks upon Lord Davenant as one of the first sages of England, that is to say, of Europe; and she says he is well acquainted with all Lord

Davenant's works—and it is my belief," concluded Lady Cecilia, "that all Sir William Davenant's works go with her to papa's credit, for as she spoke she gave a polite glance towards the bookcase, where she saw their gilded backs, and I found the ambassador himself, afterwards, with 'Davenant on Trade' in his hand! Be it so: it is not, after all, you know, robbing the dead, only inheriting by mistake from a namesake, which with foreigners is allowable, because impossible to avoid, from the time of '*Monsieur Robinson parent apparemment de Monsieur Crusoe?*' to the present day."

By dint of keeping well asunder those who would not draw well together, Lady Cecilia did contrive to get through the remaining morning of this operose visit; some she sent out to drive with gallant military outriders to see places in the neighbourhood famed for this or that; others walked or boated, or went through the customary course of conservatories, pheasantry, flower-garden, pleasure-grounds, and best views of Clarendon Park—and billiards always. The political conferences were held in Lord Davenant's apartment: to what these conferences tended we never knew and never shall; we consider them as matters of history, and leave them with due deference to the historian; we have to do only with biography. Far be it from us to meddle with politics—we have quite enough to do with manners and morality.

Chapter xxvij.

THE next day, as Helen was going across the hall, she saw the members of the last political conclave coming out of Lord Davenant's room, each looking as if the pope had not been chosen

according to his wish—dark and disappointed; even Mr Harley's radiant countenance was dimmed, and the dry symptomatic cough which he gave after taking leave of Lady Davenant, convinced Helen that all was not well within. He departed, and there seemed to be among those who remained a greater constraint than ever. There appeared to be in each an awakened sense that there were points on which they could never agree; all seemed to feel how different it would have been if Mr Harley had remained. True, the absence or presence of a person of genius makes as much difference in the whole appearance of things, as sunshine or no sunshine on the landscape.

Dinner, however, was got through, for time and the hour, two hours, or three, will get through the roughest dinner or the smoothest. "Never saw a difficult dinner-party better bothered!" was Lady Bearcroft's compliment, whispered to Cecilia as they went into the drawing-room; and Helen, notwithstanding Lady Bearcroft's vulgarity, could not help beginning absolutely to like her for her good-nature and amazingly prompt sympathy; but, after all, good-nature without good manners is but a blundering ally, dangerous to its best friend.

This evening, Lady Cecilia felt that every one was uncomfortable, and, flitting about the room, she touched here and there to see how things were going on. They were not going on well, and she could not make them better; even her efforts at conciliation were ineffectual: she had stepped in between her mother, some of the gentlemen, and the general, in an argument in which she heard indications of strife, and she set about to explain away contradictions, and to convince everybody that they were really all of the same opinion. With her sweet voice and pretty persuasive look, this might have done for the general, as a

relaxing smile seemed to promise; but it would not do at all with Lady Davenant, who, from feelings foreign to the present matter, was irritated, and spoke, as Helen thought, too harshly:—"Cecilia, you would act *Harmony* in the comedy to perfection; but, unfortunately, I am not one of those persons who can be persuaded that when I say one thing I mean quite another—probably because it is not my practice so to do. That old epigram, Sir Benjamin, do you know it," continued she, "which begins with a bankrupt's roguish '*Whereas?*'

'Whereas the religion and fate of three nations
Depend on th' importance of our conversations:
Whereas some objections are thrown in our way,
And words have been construed to mean what they say—
Be it known from henceforth to each friend and each brother,
Whene'er we *say* one thing we *mean* quite another.'"

Sir Benjamin gravely remarked that it was good law practice. The courts themselves would be shut up if some such doctrine were not understood in the practice there, *sub audito*, if not publicly proclaimed with an absolute "Whereas be it known from henceforth."

Whether this was dry humour of Sir Benjamin's, or plain matter of fact and serious opinion, the gravity with which it was delivered indicated not; but it produced the good effect of a smile, a laugh, at him or with him. Lady Cecilia did not care which, the laugh was good at all events; her invincible good-nature and sweetness of temper had not been soured or conquered even by her mother's severity; and Lady Davenant, observing this, forgave and wished to be forgiven.

"My dearest Cecilia," said she, "clasp this bracelet for me, will you? It would really be a national blessing, if, in the present times, all women were as amiable as you,

'Fond to spread friendships, but to cover heats.'"

Then, turning to a French gentleman, she spoke of the

change she had observed when she was last at Paris, from the overwhelming violence of party spirit on all sides.

"Dreadfully true," the French gentleman replied—"party spirit, taking every Proteus form, calling itself by a hundred names and with a thousand devices and watchwords, which would be too ridiculous, if they were not too terrible—domestic happiness destroyed, all society disordered, disorganised—literature not able to support herself, scarcely appearing in company—all precluded, superseded by the politics of the day."

Lady Davenant joined with him in his regrets, and added, that she feared society in England would soon be brought to the same condition.

"No," said the French gentleman, "English ladies will never be so vehement as my countrywomen; they will never become, I hope, like some of our lady politicians, '*qui heurlent comme des demons.*'"

Lady Cecilia said that, from what she had seen at Paris, she was persuaded that if the ladies did bawl too loud it was because the gentlemen did not listen to them; that above half the party-violence which appeared in Parisian belles was merely dramatic, to produce a sensation, and draw the gentlemen, from the black *pelotons* in which they gathered, back to their proper positions round the *fauteuils* of the fair ladies.

The foreigner, speaking to what he saw passing in Lady Davenant's mind, went on;—"Ladies can do much, however, in this as in all other dilemmas where their power is, and ought to be, omnipotent."

"Female *influence* is and ought to be *potent*," said the general, with an emphasis on influence, contradistinguishing it from power, and reducing the exaggeration of omnipotent by the short process of lopping off two syllables.

"So long as ladies keep in their own proper

character," said Lady Davenant, "all is well; but, if once they cease to act as women, that instant they lose their privilege—their charm: they forfeit their exorcising power; they can no longer command the demon of party nor themselves, and he transforms them directly, as you say," said she to the French gentleman, "into actual furies."

"And, when so transformed, sometimes unconscious of their state," said the general drily, his eye glancing towards the other end of the room, and lighting upon Lady Bearcroft, who was at the instant very red and very loud: and Lady Cecilia was standing, as if watchful for a moment's pause, in which to interpose her word of peace. She waited for some time in vain, for when she hastened from the other end of the room to this—the scene of action, things had come to such a pass between the ladies Masham and Bearcroft, that mischief, serious mischief, must have ensued, had not Lady Cecilia, at utmost need, summoned to her aid the happy genius of Nonsense—the genius of Nonsense, in whose elfin power even Love delights; on whom Reason herself condescends often to smile, even when Logic frowns, and chops him on his block: but cut in twain, the ethereal spirit soon unites again, and lives, and laughs. But mark him well—this little happy genius of Nonsense; see that he be the true thing—the genuine spirit. You will know him by his well-bred air and tone, which none can counterfeit; and by his smile; for while most he makes others laugh, the arch little rogue seldom goes beyond a smile himself! Graceful in the midst of all his pranks, he never goes too far—though far enough he has been known to go—he has crept into the armour of the great hero, convulsed the senate in the wig of a chancellor, and becomingly, decorously, put on now and then the mitre of an archbishop. "If good people," said Archbishop Usher,

"would but make goodness agreeable, and smile, instead of frowning in their virtue, how many they would win to the good cause!" Lady Cecilia in this was good at need, and at her utmost need, obedient to her call, came this happy little genius, and brought with him song and dance, riddle and charade, and comic prints; and on a half-opened parcel of books Cecilia darted, and produced a Comic Annual, illustrated by him whom no risible muscles can resist. All smiled who understood, and mirth admitted of her crew all who smiled, and party-spirit fled. But there were foreigners present. Foreigners cannot well understand our local allusions; our Cruikshank is to them unintelligible, and Hood's "Sorrows of Number One" quite lost upon them. Then Lady Bearcroft thought she would do as much as Lady Cecilia, and more—that she would produce what these poor foreigners could comprehend. But not at her call came the genius of lively nonsense, he heard her not. In his stead came that counterfeit, who thinks it witty to be rude—

> "And placing raillery in railing,
> Will tell aloud your greatest failing—"

that vulgar imp yclept Fun—known by his broad grin, by his loud tone, and by his rude banter. Head foremost forcing himself in, came he, and brought with him a heap of coarse caricatures, and they were party caricatures.

"Capital!" Lady Bearcroft, however, pronounced them, as she spread all upon the table for applause—but no applause ensued.

Not such, these, as real good English humour produces and enjoys, independently of party—these were all too broad, too coarse. Lady Davenant despised, the general detested, Helen turned away, and Lady Cecilia threw them under the table, that they might not be seen

by the foreigners. "For the honour of England, do not let them be spread abroad, pray, Lady Bearcroft."

"The world is grown mighty nice!" said Lady Bearcroft; "for my part, give me a good laugh when it is to be had."

"Perhaps we shall find one here," said Lady Cecilia, opening a portfolio of caricatures in a different style, but they were old, and Lady Bearcroft would have thrown them aside; but Lord Davenant observed that, if they have lasted so long, they must be good, because their humour only can ensure their permanence; the personality dies with the person; for instance, in the famous old print of the minister rat-catcher, in the Westminster election, the likeness to each rat of the day is lost to us, but the ridicule on placemen ratters remains. The whole, however, is perfectly incomprehensible to foreigners.

"Rats! rat!" repeated one of the foreigners, as he looked at and studied the print. It was amusing to see the gravity with which this foreign diplomatist, quite new to England, listened to Lady Bearcroft's explanation of what is meant in English by a *rat political*. She was at first rather good on this topic, professing a supernatural acuteness of the senses, arising from an unconquerable antipathy, born with her, to the whole race of *rats*. She declared that she could see a rat a mile off in any man—could, from the moment a man opened his mouth in Parliament, or on the hustings, prophesy whether he would turn into a rat at last, or not. She, moreover, understood the language of rats of every degree, and knew even when they said "No," that they meant "Yes"—two monosyllables, the test of rats, which betray them all sooner or later, and transform the biped into the quadruped, who then turns tail, and runs always to the other side, from whatever side he may be of.

The *chargé-d'affaires* stood in half bow, lending deferential ear and serious attention the whole time of this lecture upon rats, without being able from beginning to end to compass its meaning, and at the close, with a disconsolate shrug, he exclaimed, "*Ah! Je renonce à ça*——"

Lady Bearcroft went on—"Since I cannot make your excellency understand by description what I mean by an English rat-political, I must give you an example or two, dead and living—living best, and I have more than one noted and branded rat in my eye."

But Lady Cecilia, anxious to interrupt this perilous business, hastily rang for wine and water; and as the gentlemen went to help themselves she gave them a general toast, as sitting down to the pianoforte, to the tune of—

"Here's to the maiden of blushing fifteen."

She sang—

"Here's to rats and ratcatchers of every degree,
The rat that is trapped, and the rat that is free,
The rat that is shy, sir, the rat that is bold, sir,
The rat upon sale, sir, the rat that is sold, sir.
Let the rats rat! Success to them all,
And well off to the old ones before the house fall!"

Chapter xxviii.

SIR BENJAMIN and Lady Bearcroft departed at six o'clock the next morning, and all the rest of the political and diplomatic corps *left* immediately after breakfast.

Lady Davenant looked relieved, the general satisfied, and Lady Cecilia consoled herself with the hope that, if she had done no good, she had not done any harm

This was a bad slide, perhaps, in the magic lantern, but would leave no trace behind. She began now to be very impatient for Beauclerc's appearance; always sanguine, and as rapid in her conclusions as she was precipitate in her actions, she felt no doubt, no anxiety, as to the future; for, though she refrained from questioning Helen as to her sentiments for Beauclerc, she was pretty well satisfied on that subject. Helen was particularly grateful to Lady Cecilia for this forbearance, being almost ashamed to own, even to herself, how exceedingly happy she felt; and now that it was no longer wrong in her to love, or dishonourable in him to wish to be loved, she was surprised to find how completely the idea of Beauclerc was connected with and interwoven through all her thoughts, pursuits, and sentiments. He had certainly been constantly in her company for several months, a whole summer, but she could scarcely believe that during this time he could have become so necessary to her happiness. While, with still increasing agitation, she looked forward to his arrival, she felt as if Lady Davenant's presence was a sort of protection, a something to rely on, in the new circumstances in which she was to be placed. Lord Davenant had returned to town, but Lady Davenant remained. The Russian embassy seemed still in abeyance.

One morning, as Helen was sitting in Lady Davenant's room alone with her, she said suddenly: "At your age, Helen, I had as little taste for what are called politics as you have, yet you see what I am come to, and by the same road you may, you will, arrive at the same point."

"I! oh, I hope not!" cried Helen, almost before she felt the whole inference that might be drawn from this exclamation.

"You hope not?" repeated her ladyship calmly.

"Let us consider this matter rationally, and put our hopes, and our fears, and our prejudices out of the question, if possible. Let me observe to you, that the position of women in society is somewhat different from what it was a hundred years ago, or as it was sixty, or I will say thirty years since. Women are now so highly cultivated, and political subjects are at present of so much importance, of such high interest, to all human creatures who live together in society, you can hardly expect, Helen, that you, as a rational being, can go through the world as it now is without forming any opinion on points of public importance. You cannot, I conceive, satisfy yourself with the common namby-pamby little missy phrase, 'ladies have nothing to do with politics.'"

Helen blushed, for she was conscious that, wrong or right, namby-pamby, little missy, or not, she had hitherto satisfied herself very comfortably with some such thought.

"Depend upon it, Helen," resumed Lady Davenant, "that when you are married, your love for a man of superior abilities, and of superior character, must elevate your mind to sympathy with all his pursuits, with all the subjects which claim his attention."

Helen felt that she must become strongly interested in every subject in which the man she loved was interested; but still she observed that she had not abilities or information, like Lady Davenant's, that could justify her in attempting to follow her example. Besides, Helen was sure that, even if she had, it would not suit her taste; and besides, in truth, she did not think it well suited to a woman—she stopped when she came to that last thought. But what kindness and respect suppressed was clearly understood by her penetrating friend. Fixing her eyes upon Helen, she said with a smile, the candour and nobleness

of her character rising above all little irritation of temper—

"I agree with you, my dear Helen, in all you do *not* say, and were I to begin life over again, my conduct should in some respects be different. Of the public dangers and private personal inconveniences that may result from women becoming politicians, or, as you better express our meaning, interfering with public affairs, no one can be more aware than I am. *Interfering*, observe I say, for I would mark and keep the line between influence and interference. Female influence must, will, and ought to exist on political subjects as on all others; but this influence should always be domestic, not public—the customs of society have so ruled it. Of the thorns in the path of ambitious men all moralists talk, but there are little, scarcely visible, thorns of a peculiar sort that beset the path of an ambitious woman, the venomous prickles of the *domestic bramble*, a plant not perhaps mentioned in Withering's Botany, or the Hortus Kewensis, but it is too well known to many, and to me it has been sorely known."

At this instant General Clarendon came in with some letters, which had been forwarded to him express. One, for Lady Davenant, he had been desired to put into her hands himself: he retired, and Lady Davenant opened the letter. By the first glance at her countenance, Helen saw that there was something in it which had surprised and given her great concern. Helen withdrew her eyes, and waited till she should speak. But Lady Davenant was quite silent, and Helen, looking at her again, saw her put her hand to her heart, as if from some sudden sense of violent bodily pain, and she sank on the sofa, fell back, and became as pale as death and motionless. Excessively frightened, Helen threw open the window, rang the bell for Lady

Davenant's own woman, and sent the page for Lady Cecilia. In a few moments Lady Cecilia and Elliott came. Neither was as much alarmed as Helen had expected they would be. They had seen Lady Davenant under similar attacks — they knew what remedies to apply. Elliott was a remarkably composed, steady person. She now went on doing all that was necessary without speaking a word. The paroxysm lasted longer than usual, as Lady Cecilia observed; and, though she continued her assurances to Helen that "It was all nervous—only nerves," she began evidently to be herself alarmed. At length symptoms of returning animation appeared, and then Cecilia retired, beckoning to Helen to follow her into the next room. "We had better leave mamma to Elliott, she will be happier if she thinks we know nothing of the matter." Then, recollecting that Helen had been in the room when this attack came on, she added—"But no, you must go back, for mamma will remember that you were present—take as little notice, however, as possible of what has happened."

Cecilia said that her mother, when they were abroad, had been subject to such seizures at intervals, "and in former times, before I was born, I believe," said Lady Cecilia, "she had some kind of extraordinary disease in the heart; but she has a particular aversion to being thought nervous. Every physician who has ever pronounced her nervous has always displeased her, and has been dismissed. She was once quite vexed with me for barely suggesting the idea. There," cried Cecilia, "I hear her voice, go to her."

Helen followed Lady Cecilia's suggestion, and took as little notice as possible of what had happened. Elliott disappeared as she entered—the page was

waiting at the door, but to Helen's satisfaction Lady Davenant did not admit him. "Not yet; tell him I will ring when I want him," said she. The door closed: and Lady Davenant, turning to Helen, said, "Whether I live or die is a point of some consequence to the friends who love me; but there is another question, Helen, of far more importance to me, and, I trust, to them. That question is, whether I continue to live as I have lived, honoured and respected, or live and die dishonoured and despised"—her eye glanced towards the letter she had been reading. "My poor child," continued Lady Davenant, looking at Helen's agitated countenance—"My poor child, I will not keep you in suspense." She then told Helen that she was suspected of having revealed a secret of State that had been confided to her husband, and which it was supposed, and truly supposed, that Lord Davenant had told to her. Beyond its political importance, the disclosure involved a charge of baseness, in her having betrayed confidence, having suffered a copy of a letter from an illustrious personage to be handed about and read by several people. "Lord Davenant as yet knows nothing of this, the effect upon him is what I most dread. I cannot show you this," continued she, opening again the letter she had just received, "because it concerns others as well as myself. I am, at all events, under obligations that can never be forgotten to the person who gave me this timely notice, which could no otherwise have reached me, and the person to whom I am thus obliged is one, Helen, whom neither you nor I like, and whom Cecilia particularly dislikes —Miss Clarendon! Her manner of doing me this service is characteristic: she begins—

"'Miss Clarendon is aware that Lady Davenant has no liking for her, but that shall not prevent Miss Clarendon from doing what she thinks an act of justice

towards a noble character falsely attacked.' "—Lady Davenant read no more.

"Had not you better wait till you are stronger, my dear Lady Davenant?" said Helen, seeing her prepare to write.

"It was once said, gloriously well," replied Lady Davenant, "that the duties of life are more than life itself—so I think."

While she wrote, Helen thought of what she had just heard, and she ventured to interrupt Lady Davenant to ask if she had formed any idea of the means by which the secret could have been betrayed—or the copy of the letter obtained.

"Yes, she had a suspicion of one person, the diplomatist to whom Mr Harley had shown such a mortal antipathy. She recollected that the last morning the *Congress* had sat in Lord Davenant's cabinet, she had left her writing-desk there, and this letter was in it; she thought that she had locked the desk when she had left the room, it certainly was fast when she returned, but it had a spring Bramah lock, and its being shut down would have fastened it. She had no proof one way or other, her suspicion rested where was her instinctive dislike. It was remarkable, however, that she at once did justice to another person whom she did not like, Mr Mapletofft, Lord Davenant's secretary. "His manners do not please me," she said, "but I have perfect confidence in his integrity."

Helen felt and admired this generous candour, but her suspicions were not of the diplomatist alone: she thought of one who might perhaps have been employed by him—Carlos the page. And many circumstances, which she recollected and put together, now strengthened this suspicion. She wondered it had not occurred to Lady Davenant; she thought it must, but that she did not choose to mention it. Helen had often heard

Lady Davenant's particular friends complain that it was extremely disagreeable to them to have this boy constantly in the room. Whatever might be the conversation, there was the page, either before or behind a skreen, always within hearing.

Lady Davenant said that, as Carlos was a Portuguese, and had never been in England till she had brought him over, a few months before, he could not understand English well enough to comprehend what was going on. This was doubted, especially by Helen, who had watched his countenance, and had represented her doubts and her reasons for them to Lady Davenant, but she was not convinced. It was one of the few points on which she could justly be reproached with adhering to her fancy instead of listening to reason. The more Carlos was attacked, the more she adhered to him. In fact, it was not so much because he was a favourite, as because he was a protégé; he was completely dependent upon her protection: she had brought him to England, had saved him from his mother, a profligate camp-follower, had freed him from the most miserable condition possible, and had raised him to easy, happy, confidential life. To the generous the having conferred an obligation is in itself a tie hard to sever. All noble-minded people believe in fidelity, and never doubt of gratitude; they throw their own souls into those they oblige, and think and feel for them, as they, in their situation, would think and feel. Lady Davenant considered it an injustice to doubt the attachment of this boy, and a cruelty she deemed it to suspect him causelessly of being the most base of human creatures —he, a young defenceless orphan. Helen had more than once offended, by attempting to stop Lady Davenant from speaking imprudently before Carlos; she was afraid, even at this moment, to irritate her by giving utterance to her doubts; she determined, there-

fore, to keep them to herself till she had some positive grounds for her suspicions. She resolved to watch the boy very carefully. Presently, having finished her letters, Lady Davenant rang for him. Helen's eyes were upon Carlos the moment he entered, and her thoughts did not escape observation.

"You are wrong, Helen," said Lady Davenant, as she lighted the taper to seal her letters.

"If I am not right," said Helen, keeping her eyes upon the boy's changing countenance, "I am too suspicious—but observe, am I not right, at this instant, in thinking that his countenance is *bad?*"

Lady Davenant could not but see that countenance change in an extraordinary manner, in spite of his efforts to keep it steady.

"You cause that of which you complain," said she, going on sealing her letters deliberately. "In courts of public justice, and in private equity," the word *equity* she pronounced with an austere emphasis, "how often is the change of countenance misinterpreted. The sensibility of innocence, that cannot bear to be suspected, is often mistaken for the confusion worse confounded of guilt."

Helen observed that, as Lady Davenant spoke, and spoke in his favour, the boy's countenance cleared up; that vacillating expression of fear, and consciousness of having something within him unwhipt of justice, completely disappeared, and his whole air was now bold and open—towards Helen, almost an air of defiance.

"What do you think is the cause of this change in his countenance—you observe it, do you not?" asked Helen.

"Yes, and the cause is as plain as the change. He sees I do not suspect him, though you do; and seeing, Helen, that he has at least one friend in the world, who will do him justice, the orphan boy takes courage."

"I wish I could be as good as you are, my dearest Lady Davenant," said Helen; "but I cannot help still feeling, and saying—I doubt. Now observe him, while I speak; I will turn my eyes away, that my terrible looks may not confound him. You say he knows that you do not suspect him, and that I do. How does he know it?"

"How?" said Lady Davenant. "By the universal language of the eyes."

"Not only by that universal language, I think," said Helen; "but I suspect he understands every word we say."

Helen, without ever looking up from a bunch of seals which she was rubbing bright, slowly and very distinctly added—

"I think that he can speak, read, and write English."

A change in the countenance of Carlos appeared, notwithstanding all his efforts to hold his features in the same position; instead of placid composure there was now grim rigidity.

"Give me the great seal with the coat of arms on it," said Lady Davenant, dropping the wax on her letter, and watching the boy's eye as she spoke, without herself looking towards the seal she had described. He never stirred, and Helen began to fear she was unjust and suspicious. But again her doubts, at least of his disposition, occurred: as she was passing through Lady Davenant's dressing-room with her, when they were going down to dinner, the page following them, Helen caught his figure in the mirror, and saw that he was making a horrible grimace at her behind her back, his dark countenance expressing extreme hatred and revenge. Helen touched Lady Davenant's arm, but, before her eye could be directed to the glass, Carlos, perceiving that he was observed, pretended to be suddenly seized with the cramp in his foot, which obliged him to make

these frightful contortions. Helen was shocked by his artfulness, but it succeeded with Lady Davenant; it was in vain to say more about it to her, so Helen let it pass. When she mentioned it afterwards to Lady Cecilia, she said—"I am sorry, for your sake, Helen, that this happened; depend upon it, that revengeful little Portuguese gnome will work you mischief some time or other." Helen did not think of herself—indeed she could not imagine any means by which he could possibly work her woe; but the face was so horrible, that it came again and again before her eyes, and she was more and more determined to watch Carlos constantly.

This was one of the public days at Clarendon Park, on which there was a good deal of company; many of the neighbouring gentry were to be at dinner. When Lady Davenant appeared, no inquiries concerning her health were made by her daughter or by the general—no allusion to her having been unwell. She seemed quite recovered, and Helen observed that she particularly exerted herself, and that her manner was more gracious than usual to commonplace people—more present to everything that was passing. She retired, however, early, and took Helen with her. The depression of her spirits, or rather the weight upon her mind, appeared again as soon as they were alone together. She took her writing-desk, and looked over some letters which she said ought to be burned. She could not sleep in peace, she said—she ought not to sleep, till this was done. Several of these, as she looked over them, seemed to give her pain, and excited her indignation or contempt as she from time to time exclaimed—"Meanness!—corruption!—ingratitude too!—all favours forgotten! To see—to feel this—is the common fate of all who have lived the life I have lived; of this I am not so inconsistent as to complain. But it is hard that my

own character—the integrity of a whole life—should avail me nothing! And yet," added she, after a moment's pause of reflection, "to how few can my character be really known! Women cannot, like men, make their characters known by public actions. I have no right to complain; but if Lord Davenant's honour is to be——" She paused; her thoughts seeming too painful for utterance. She completed the arrangement of the papers, and, as she pressed down the lid of her writing-box, and heard the closing sound of the lock, she said—"Now I may sleep in peace." She put out the lamp, and went to her bedroom, carrying with her two or three books which she intended to read after she should be in bed; for, though she talked of sleeping, it was plain she thought she should not. Helen prevailed upon her to let her remain with her, and read to her.

She opened first a volume of Shakspeare, in which was Lady Davenant's mark. "Yes," said she, "read that speech of Wolsey's; read that whole scene, the finest picture of ambition ever drawn." And, after she had heard the scene, she observed that there is no proof more certain of the truth of poetic description, than its recurring to us at the time we strongly feel. "Those who tell us," continued she, "that it is unnatural to recollect poetry or eloquence at times of powerful emotion are much mistaken; they have not strong feelings or strong imaginations. I can affirm, from my own experience, that it is perfectly natural." Lady Davenant rapidly mentioned some instances of this sort which she recollected, but seeing the anxiety of Helen's look, she added, "You are afraid that I am feverish; you wish me to rest; then go on reading to me."

Helen read on, till Lady Davenant declared she would not let her sit up any longer. "Only, before

you go, my dear child, look here at what I have been looking at while you have been reading." She made Helen place herself so as to see exactly in the same direction and light in which she was looking, and she pointed out to her, in the lining of the bed, a place where, from the falling of the folds and the crinkles in the material, a figure with the head, head-dress, and perfect profile of an old woman with a turned-up chin appeared. At first Helen could not see it; but at last she caught it, and was struck with it. "The same sort of curious effect of chance resemblance and coincidence which painters, Leonardo da Vinci in particular, have observed in the moss and stains on old stones," observed Lady Davenant. "But it struck me to-night, Helen, perhaps because I am a little feverish—it struck me in a new point of view—moral, not picturesque. If such be the effects of chance, or of coincidence, how cautious we should be in deciding from appearances, or pronouncing from circumstantial evidence upon the guilt of evil design in any human creature."

"You mean this to apply to me about Carlos?" said Helen.

"I do. But not only of him and you was I thinking; but of myself and those who judge of me falsely from coincidences, attributing to me designs which I never had, and actions of which I am incapable." She suddenly raised herself in her bed, and was going to say more, but the pendule striking at that instant two o'clock, she stopped abruptly, kissed Helen, and sent her away.

Helen gathered together and carried away with her all the books, that Lady Davenant might not be tempted to look at them more. As she had several piled on one arm, and had a taper in her hand, she was somewhat encumbered, and, though she managed to open the bedroom door, and to shut it again without letting

any of the books fall, and crossed the little anteroom between the bedchamber and dressing-room safely, yet, as she was opening the dressing-room door, and taking too much or too little care of some part of her pyramid of books, down came the whole pile with a noise which, in the stillness of the night, sounded tremendous. She was afraid it would disturb Lady Davenant, and was going back to tell her what it was, when she was startled by hearing, as she thought, the moving of a chair or table in the dressing-room: she stopped short to listen—all was silent; she thought she had mistaken the direction in which the noise came.

She softly opened the dressing-room door, and looked in—all was silent—no chair, or stool, or table overturned, everything was in its place exactly as they had left it, but there was a strong smell of a half-extinguished lamp: she thought it had been put out when they had left the room, she now supposed it had not been sufficiently lowered, she turned the screw, and took care now to see it completely extinguished; then went back for the books, and as people sometimes will, when most tired and most late, be most orderly, she would not go to bed without putting every volume in its place in the book-case. After reaching to put one book upon the highest shelf, as she was getting down she laid her hand on the top of Lady Davenant's writing-box, and, as she leaned on it, was surprised to hear the click of its lock closing. The sound was so peculiar she could not be mistaken; besides, she thought she had felt the lid give way under her pressure. There was no key left in the lock—she perfectly recollected the very sound of that click when Lady Davenant shut the lid down before leaving the room this night. She stood looking at the lock, and considering how this could be, and as she remained perfectly still, she heard, or thought she heard, some one breathing near her.

Holding in her own breath, she listened and cautiously looked round, without stirring from the place where she stood—one of the window-curtains moved, so at least she thought—yes, certainly there was some living thing behind it. It might be Lady Davenant's great dog; but looking again at the bottom of the curtain she saw a human foot. The page, Carlos! was her instant suspicion, and his vengeful face came before her, and a vision of a stiletto! or she did not well know what. She trembled all over; yet she had presence of mind enough to recollect that she should not seem to take notice. And, while she moved about the books on the table, she gave another look, and saw that the foot was not withdrawn. She knew she was safe still, it had not been perceived that she had seen it; now what was she to do? "Go up to that curtain and draw it back and face the boy"—but she did not dare; yet he was only a boy—But it might be a man and not the page. Better go and call somebody—tell Lady Davenant. She MUST go through the antechamber, and pass close to that curtain to open the door. All this was the thought of one moment, and she went on holding up the light to the book-shelves as if in quest of some book, and kept coasting along to gain the door; she was afraid when she was to pass the window-curtain, either of touching it, or of stumbling over that foot. But she got past without touching or stumbling, opened the door, whisked through—that was done too quickly, but she could not help it—she shut, bolted the door, and ran across the antechamber to Lady Davenant's bedroom. She entered softly, aware of the danger to her of sudden alarm. But Lady Davenant was not asleep, was not alarmed, but was *effective* in a moment. First she asked:—"Did you lock the door after you?" "Yes, bolted it."—"That is well." Neither of them said, "Who do you

think it is?" But each knew what the other thought. They returned through the antechamber to the dressing-room. But when they opened the door, all was quiet—no one behind the curtain, no one in the room—they searched under the sofas, everywhere; there was no closet or hiding-place in which any one could be concealed. The window fastenings were unstirred. But the door into the gallery was unlocked, and the simple thing appeared—that Helen, in her confusion, had thought only of fastening the door into the antechamber, which also opened on the gallery, but had totally forgotten to lock that from the dressing-room into the gallery, by which whoever had been in the room had escaped without any difficulty. Lady Davenant rather inclined to believe that no one had been there, and that it was all Helen's imagination. But Helen persisted that she had seen what she had seen, and heard what she had heard. They went into the gallery—all silence, no creature visible, and the doors at the ends of the gallery locked outside.

After a fruitless search they retired, Lady Davenant to her own room, and Helen to hers, full of shame and regret that she had not had the courage to open the curtain at the right moment. Nothing could stir her belief, however, in the evidence of her senses; the boy must have been there, and must be still concealed somewhere in the gallery, or in some of the rooms opening into it. Some of these were unoccupied, but they were all locked up, as Lady Davenant had told her when she had proposed searching them; one or two they tried and found fastened. She stood at her own door, after having put down the candle on her table, still giving a lingering look-out, when, through the darkness in the gallery at the further end, she saw a ray of light on the floor, which seemed to come from under the door of a room unoccupied—Mr Mapletofft's

room; he had gone to town with Lord Davenant. Helen went on tiptoe very softly along the gallery, almost to this door, when it suddenly opened, and the page stood before her, the lamp in his hand shining full on his face and on hers. Both started—then both were motionless for one second—but he, recovering instantly, shot back again into the room, flung to the door, and locked it.

"Seen him!" cried Lady Davenant, when Helen flew to her room and told her; "seen him! do you say?" and then ringing her bell, she bade Helen run and knock at the general's door, while she went herself to Mr Mapletofft's room, commanding Carlos to open the door immediately. But he would not open it, nor make any answer; the servants came, and the general ordered one to go round to the windows of the room lest the boy should escape that way. It was too late, he had escaped; when the door was forced, one of the windows was found open; Carlos was not in the room; he must have swung himself down from the height by means of a tree which was near the window. The lamp was still burning, and papers half burnt smouldering on the table. There were sufficient remains to tell what they had been. Lady Davenant saw, in the handwriting of Carlos, copies of letters taken from her desk. One half unburnt cover of the packet he had been making up, showed by its direction to whom it was to have been sent, and there were a few lines in the boy's own writing withinside addressed to his employer, which revealed the whole. His employer was, as Lady Davenant had suspected—the diplomatist!

A duplicate Bramah key was found under the table, and she recollected that she had some months ago missed this duplicate key of her desk, and supposed she had dropped it from her watch-ring while out walking;

she recollected, further, that Carlos had with great zeal assisted her in the search for it all through the shrubbery walks. The proofs of this boy's artifice and long-premeditated treachery, accumulating upon Lady Davenant, shocked her so much that she could not think of anything else. "Is it possible? is it in human nature?" she exclaimed. "Such falsehood, such art, such ingratitude!" As she fixed her eyes upon the writing, scarcely yet dry, she repeated. "It *is* his writing—I see it, yet can scarcely believe it! I, who taught him to write myself—guided that little hand to make the first letters that he ever formed! And this is in human nature! I could not have conceived it—it is dreadful to be so convinced, it lowers one's confidence in one's fellow-creatures. That is the worst of all!" She sighed deeply, and then, turning to Helen, said, "But let us think no more of it to-night, we can do no more, they are in pursuit of him; I hope I may never, never, see him more."

Chapter xxix.

SOME people value their friends most for active service, some for passive kindness. Some are won by tender expressions, some convinced by solid proofs of regard; others of a yet nobler kind, and of this sort was Lady Davenant, are apt to be best pleased, most touched, by proofs that their own character has been thoroughly understood, and that they have justly appreciated the good qualities of their friend. More than by all the kindness and sympathy Helen had ever before shown her was she now pleased and touched by the respect for her feelings in this affair of the page; Helen never having at the moment of

his detection nor afterwards, by word or look, indulged in the self-triumph of "You see how right I was!" which implies, "You see how wrong you were!" On the contrary, she gave what comfort she honestly could by showing that she knew from what humane motives and generous feelings Lady Davenant had persisted in supporting this boy to the last.

As to the little wretch himself, he appeared no more. Search was made for him in every direction, but he was not to be found, and Helen thought it was well that Lady Davenant should be spared the pain of seeing or hearing more about him.

The whole mystery was now solved, the difficulty for Lady Davenant in a fair way to be ended. She had felt an instinctive aversion to the fawning tone of the diplomatist, whom she had suspected of caballing against Lord Davenant secretly, and it was now proved that he had been base beyond what she could have conceived possible; had been in confederacy with this boy, whom he had corrupted, purchasing from him copies of private letters, and bribing him to betray his benefactress. The copy of that letter from an illustrious personage had been thus obtained. The proofs now brought home to the guilty person deprived him at once of all future means of injuring Lord Davenant. Completely in their power, he would be ready to ensure silence at any price, and, instead of caballing further, this low intriguer would now be compelled to return from whence he came, too happy to be permitted to retreat from his situation, and quit England without being brought to public disgrace. No notice of the report that had been in private circulation against Lady Davenant having yet appeared in the public prints, it was possible to prevent the mischief that even the mention of her name in such an affair must have occasioned. It was necessary, however, that letters should be written

immediately to the different persons whom the private reports had reached; and Helen and her daughter trembled for her health in consequence of this extreme hurry and fatigue, but she repeated her favourite maxim—"Better to wear out, than to rust out"—and she accomplished all that was to be done. Lord Davenant wrote in triumph that all was settled, all difficulties removed, and they were to set out for Russia immediately.

And now Lady Davenant breathed freely. Relieved from the intolerable thought that the base finger of suspicion could point at her or at Lord Davenant, her spirits rose, her whole appearance renovated, and all the fears that Helen and her daughter had felt, lest she should not be able to sustain the hardships of a long voyage and the rigour of a northern climate, were now completely dispelled.

The day of departure was fixed—Lady Davenant remained, however, as long as she possibly could with her daughter; and she was anxious, too, to see Granville Beauclerc before she left Clarendon Park.

The number of the days of quarantine were gone over every morning at breakfast by Lady Cecilia and the general; they looked in the papers carefully for the arrivals at the hotel which Beauclerc usually frequented. This morning, in reading the list aloud, the general came to the name of Sir Thomas D'Aubigny, brother to the colonel. The paragraph stated that Colonel D'Aubigny had left some manuscripts to his brother, which would soon be published, and then followed some puff in the usual style, which the general did not think it necessary to read. But one of the officers, who knew some of the D'Aubignys, went on talking of the colonel, and relating various anecdotes to prove that his souvenirs would be amusing. Helen, who was conscious that she always blushed

when Colonel D'Aubigny's name was mentioned, and that the general had observed it, was glad that he never looked up from what he was reading; and when she had courage to turn towards her, she admired Cecilia's perfect self-possession. Beauclerc's name was not among the arrivals, and it was settled consequently that they should not see him this day.

Some time after they had left the breakfast-room, Helen found Lady Davenant in her own apartment, sitting, as it was very unusual with her, perfectly unemployed—her head leaning on her hand, and an expression of pain in her countenance. "Are not you well, my dear Lady Davenant?" Helen asked.

"My mind is not well," she replied, "and that always affects my body, and I suppose my looks." After a moment's silence she fixed her eyes on Helen, and said, "You tell me that Colonel D'Aubigny never was a lover—never was an admirer of yours?"

"Never!" said Helen, low, but very decidedly. Lady Davenant sighed, but did not speak.

After a longer continuance of silence than had almost ever occurred when they two were alone together, Lady Davenant looked up, and said, "I hope in God that I am mistaken. I pray that I may never live to see it!"

"To see what?" cried Helen.

"To see that one little black spot, invisible to you, Helen, the speck of evil in that heart—my daughter's heart—spread and taint, and destroy all that is good. It must be cut out—at any pain it must be cut away; if any part be unsound, the corruption will spread."

"Corruption in Cecilia!" exclaimed Helen. "Oh! I know her—I know her from dear childhood! there is nothing corrupt in her, no, not a thought!"

"My dear Helen, you see her as she has been—as she is. I see her as she may become—very—

frightfully different. Helen! if truth fail, if the principle of truth fail in her character, all will fail! All that charming nature, all that fair semblance, all that fair reality, all this bright summer's dream of happiness, even love—the supreme felicity of her warm heart—even love will fail her. Cecilia will lose her husband's affections!"

Helen uttered a faint cry.

"Worse!" continued Lady Davenant. "Worse! she will lose her own esteem, she will sink, but I shall be gone," cried she, and pressing her hand upon her heart, she faintly repeated, "Gone!" And then abruptly added, "Call Cecilia! I must see Cecilia, I must speak to her. But first I will tell you, from a few words that dropped this morning from General Clarendon, I suspect—I fear that Cecilia has deceived him!"

"Impossible!—about what—about whom?"

"That Colonel D'Aubigny," said Lady Davenant.

"I know all about it, and it was all nothing but nonsense. Did you look at her when the general read that paragraph this morning—did you see that innocent countenance?"

"I saw it, Helen, and thought as you did, but I have been so deceived—so lately—in countenance!"

"Not by hers—never."

"Not by yours, Helen, never. And yet, why should I say so? This very morning, yours, had I not known you, yours would have misled me."

"Oh, my foolish absurd habit of blushing, how I wish I could prevent it!" said Helen; "I know it will make me betray somebody some time or other."

"Betray! What have you to betray?" cried Lady Davenant, leaning forward with an eagerness of eye and voice that startled Helen from all power of immediate reply. After an instant's pause, however,

she answered firmly, "Nothing, Lady Davenant, and that there is nothing wrong to be known about Cecilia, I as firmly believe as that I stand here at this moment. Can you suspect anything really wrong?"

"Suspect!—wrong!" cried Lady Davenant, starting up, with a look in her eyes which made Helen recoil. "Helen, what can you conceive that I suspect wrong?—Cecilia?—Colonel D'Aubigny?—What did you mean? Wrong did you say?—of Cecilia? Could you mean—could you conceive, Helen, that I, having such a suspicion, could be here—living with her—or—living anywhere——" And she sank down on the sofa again, seized with sudden spasm—in a convulsion of agonising pain. But she held Helen's hand fast grasped, detaining her—preventing her from pulling the bell; and by degrees the pain passed off, the livid hue cleared away, the colour of life once more returned, but more tardily than before, and Helen was excessively alarmed.

"Poor child! my poor, dear child, I feel—I hear your heart beating. You are a coward, Helen, but a sweet creature; and I love you—and I love my daughter. What were we saying?"

"Oh, say no more! say no more now, for Heaven's sake," said Helen, kneeling beside her; and, yielding to that imploring look, Lady Davenant, with a fond smile, parted the hair on her forehead, kissed her, and remained perfectly quiet and silent for some time.

"I am quite well again now," said she, "and quite composed. If Cecilia has told her husband the whole truth, she will continue to be, as she is, a happy wife; but if she have deceived him in the estimation of a single word—she is undone. With him, of all men, never will confidence, once broken, unite again. Now General Clarendon told me this morning—would I had known it before the marriage!—that he had made one

point with my daughter, and only one, on the faith of which he married; the point was, that she should tell him, if she had ever loved any other man. And she told him—I fear from some words which he said afterwards—I am sure he is in the belief—the certainty, that his wife never loved any man breathing but himself."

"Nor did she," said Helen. "I can answer for it—she has told him the truth—and she has nothing to fear, nor have you."

"You give me new life!" cried Lady Davenant, her face becoming suddenly radiant with hope; "but how can you answer for this, Helen? You had no part in any deceit, I am sure, but there was something about a miniature of you, which I found in Colonel D'Aubigny's hands one day. That was done, I thought at the time, to deceive me, to make me believe that you were his object.—Deceit there was."

"On his part," said Helen, "much and always; but on Cecilia's there was only, from her over-awe of you, some little concealment; but the whole was broken off and repented of, whatever little there was, long since. And as to loving him, she never did; she told me so then, and often and often she has told me so since."

"Convince me of that," said Lady Davenant; "convince me that she thought what she said. I believe, indeed, that till she met General Clarendon she never felt any enthusiastic attachment, but I thought she liked that man—it was all coquetry, flirting nonsense perhaps. Be it so—I am willing to believe it. Convince me but that she is true—there is the only point of consequence. The man is dead and gone, the whole in oblivion, and all that is of importance is her truth; convince me but of that, and I am a happy mother."

Helen brought recollections, and proofs from conversations at the time and letters since, confirming at least Cecilia's own belief that she had never loved the

man, that it was all vanity on her part and deception on his: Lady Davenant listened, willing to be convinced.

"And now," said she, "let us put this matter out of our minds entirely—I want to talk to you of yourself."

She took Helen out with her in her pony-phaeton, and spoke of Granville Beauclerc, and of his and Helen's prospects of happiness.

Lady Cecilia, who was riding with her husband in some fields adjoining the park, caught a glimpse of the phaeton as it went along the avenue, and, while the general was giving some orders to the wood-ranger about a new plantation, she, telling him that she would be back in two minutes, cantered off to overtake her mother, and, making a short cut across the fields, she leaped a wide ha-ha which came in her way. She was an excellent horsewoman, and Fairy carried her lightly over; and when she heard the general's voice in dismay and indignation at what she had done, she turned and laughed, and cantered on till she overtook the phaeton. The breeze had blown her hair most becomingly, and raised her colour, and her eyes were joyously bright, and her light figure, always well on horseback, now looked so graceful as she bent to speak to her mother, that her husband could not find it in his heart to scold her, and he who came to chide remained to admire. Her mother, looking up at her, could not help exclaiming—

"Well! certainly, you are an excessively pretty creature!"

"Bearers of good news always look well, I believe," said she, smiling; "so there is now some goodness in my face."

"That there certainly is," said her mother fondly.

"But you certainly don't know what it is—you cannot know till I tell you, my dearest Helen—my

dear mother, I mean. Granville Beauclerc will be here to-day—I am sure of it. So pray do not go far from home—do not go out of the grounds: this was what I was in such a hurry to say to you."

"But how do you know, Cecilia?"

"Just because I can read," replied she, "because I can read a newspaper through, which none of you newspaper-readers by profession could do this morning. After you all of you laid them down I took them up, and found in that evening paper which your stupid aide-de-camp had been poring and boring over, a fresh list of arrivals, and Mr Granville Beauclerc among them at full length. Now he would not stay a moment longer in town than was absolutely necessary, you know, or else he ought to be excommunicated. But it is not in his nature to delay; he will be here directly—I should not be surprised——"

"You are right, Cecilia," interrupted the general, "I see a caleche on that road.—It is he."

The caleche turned into the park, and in a few minutes they met.—Carriages, horses, and servants were sent off to the house, while the whole party walked, and talked, and looked. Lady Cecilia was in delightful spirits, and so affectionately, so delicately joyful—so kind, that if Helen and Beauclerc had ever blamed, or had reason to blame her, it must now be for ever forgotten. As, in their walk, they came near that seat by the water's side where the lovers had parted, Cecilia whispered something to her mother, and instantly it was "done as desired." Beauclerc and Helen were left to their own explanations, and the rest of the party pursued their walk home. Of what passed in this explanatory scene no note has been transmitted to the biographer, and we must be satisfied with the result.

Chapter xxx.

"ALL is right!" cried Lady Cecilia. "O my dear mother, I am the happiest creature in the world, if you were not going away; could not you stay—a little, a very little longer—just till——"

"No, no, my dear, do not urge me to stay," said Lady Davenant; "I cannot—your father expects me to-morrow."

All her preparations were made—in short, it must be so, and Lady Davenant begged her daughter would not spend the short remaining time they were to have together in entreaties, distressing and irritating to the feelings of those who ask and of those who must refuse. "Let us enjoy in peace," said she, "all that is to be enjoyed this day before I go."

When Helen entered the drawing-room before dinner, knowing that she was very late, she found assembled Lady Davenant, Beauclerc, and the officers, but Cecilia was not there, nor did the punctual general make his appearance; the dinner-hour was passed, a servant had twice looked in to announce it, and, seeing neither my lady nor the general, had in surprise retired. Silence prevailed—what could be the matter? So unusual for the general to be late. The general came in, hurried—very uncommon in him, and, after saying a few words in a low voice to Lady Davenant, who immediately went upstairs, he begged pardon, was very sorry he had kept dinner waiting, but Lady Cecilia had been taken ill—had fainted—she was better—he hoped it was nothing that would signify—she was lying down—he begged they would go to dinner. And to dinner they went, and when Lady Davenant returned she put Helen's mind at ease by saying it was only a little faintishness from over-fatigue. She

had prescribed rest, and Cecilia had herself desired to be left quite alone. After dinner Lady Davenant went up again to see her, found her not so well—feverish; she would not let Helen go to her—they would talk if they were together, and she thought it necessary to keep Cecilia very quiet. If she would but submit to this, she would be well again probably in the morning. At tea-time, and in the course of the evening twice, Cecilia sent to beg to speak to Helen; but Lady Davenant and the general joined in requesting her not to go. The general went himself to Lady Cecilia to enforce obedience, and he reported that she had submitted with a good grace.

Helen was happily engaged by Beauclerc's conversation during the rest of the evening. It was late before they retired, and when she went upstairs, Felicie said that her lady was asleep, and had been asleep for the last two hours, and she was sure that after such good rest her ladyship would be perfectly well in the morning. Without further anxiety about her friend, therefore, Helen went to her own room. It was a fine moonlight night, and she threw open the shutters, and stood for a long time looking out upon the moonlight, which she loved; and even after she had retired to bed it was long before she could sleep. The only painful thought in her mind was of Lady Davenant's approaching departure; without her, all happiness would be incomplete; but still, hope and love had much that was delightful to whisper, and, as she at last sank to sleep, Beauclerc's voice seemed still speaking to her in soft sounds. Yet the dream which followed was uneasy; she thought that they were standing together in the library, at the open door of the conservatory, by moonlight, and he asked her to walk out, and when she did not comply, all changed, and she saw him walking with another—with Lady

Castlefort; but then the figure changed to one younger —more beautiful—it must be, as the beating of Helen's heart in the dream told her—it must be Lady Blanche. Without seeing Helen, however, they seemed to come on, smiling and talking low to each other along the matted alley of the conservatory, almost to the very door where she was still, as she thought, standing with her hand upon the lock, and then they stopped, and Beauclerc pulled from an orange-tree a blossom which seemed the very same which Helen had given to him that evening; he offered it to Lady Blanche, and something he whispered. But at this moment the handle of the lock seemed to slip, and Helen awoke with a start; and when she was awake, the noise of her dream seemed to continue; she heard the real sound of a lock turning —her door slowly opened, and a white figure appeared. Helen started up in her bed, and awaking thoroughly, saw that it was only Cecilia in her dressing-gown.

"Cecilia! What's the matter, my dear? are you worse?"

Lady Cecilia put her finger on her lips, closed the door behind her, and said, "Hush! hush! or you'll waken Felicie; she is sleeping in the dressing-room to-night. Mamma ordered it, in case I should want her."

"And how are you now? What can I do for you?"

"My dear Helen, you can do something for me indeed. But don't get up. Lie down and listen to me. I want to speak to you."

"Sit down, then, my dear Cecilia, sit down here beside me."

"No, no, I need not sit down, I am very well, standing. Only let me say what I have to say. I am quite well."

"Quite well! indeed you are not. I feel you all

trembling. You must sit down, indeed, my dear," said Helen, pressing her.

She sat down. "Now listen to me—do not waste time, for I can't stay. Oh! if the general should awake and find me gone!"

"What is the matter, my dear Cecilia? Only tell me what I can do for you."

"That is the thing; but I am afraid, now it is come to the point." Lady Cecilia breathed quick and short. "I am almost afraid to ask you to do this for me."

"Afraid! my dear Cecilia, to ask me to do anything in this world for you! How can you be afraid? Tell me only what it is at once."

"I am very foolish—I am very weak. I know you love me—would do anything for me, Helen. And this is the simplest thing in the world, but the greatest favour—the greatest service. It is only just to receive a packet, which the general will give you in the morning. He will ask if it is for you. And you will just accept of it. I don't ask you to say it is yours, or to say a word about it—only receive it for me."

"Yes, I will, to be sure. But why should he give it to me, and not to yourself?"

"Oh, he thinks, and you must let him think, it is for you, that's all. Will you promise me?"—But Helen made no answer. "Oh, promise me, promise me, speak, for I can't stay. I will explain it all to you in the morning." She rose to go.

"Stay, stay! Cecilia," cried Helen, stopping her; "stay!—you must, indeed, explain it all to me now—you must indeed!"

Lady Cecilia hesitated—said she had not time. "You said, Helen, that you would take the packet, and you know you must; but I will explain it all as

fast as I can. You know I fainted, but you do not know why? I will tell you exactly how it all happened!—You recollect my coming into the library after I was dressed, before you went upstairs, and giving you a sprig of orange flowers?"

"Oh yes, I was dreaming of it just now when you came in," said Helen. "Well, what of that?"

"Nothing, only you must have been surprised to hear so soon afterwards that I had fainted."

"Yes," Helen said, she had been very much surprised and alarmed; and again Lady Cecilia paused.

"Well, I went from you directly to Clarendon, to give him a rose, which you may remember I had in my hand for him. I found him in the study, talking to corporal somebody. He just smiled as I came in, took the rose, and said, 'I shall be ready this moment:' and looking to a table on which were heaps of letters and parcels which Granville had brought from town, he added, 'I do not know whether there is anything there for you, Cecilia?' I went to look, and he went on talking to his corporal. He was standing with his back to the table."

Helen felt that Lady Cecilia told all these minute details as if there was some fact to which she feared to come. Cecilia went on very quickly. "I did not find anything for myself; but in tossing over the papers I saw a packet directed to General Clarendon. I thought it was a feigned hand—and yet that I knew it—that I had seen it somewhere lately. There was one little flourish that I recollected; it was like the writing of that wretched Carlos."

"Carlos!" cried Helen: "well?"

"The more I looked at it," continued Lady Cecilia, "the more like I thought it; and I was going to say so to the general, only I waited till he had done his business: but as I was examining it through the outer

cover, of very thin foreign paper, I could distinguish the writing of some of the inside, and it was like your hand or like mine. You know, between our hands there is such a great resemblance, there is no telling one from the other."

Helen did not think so, but she remained silent.

"At least," said Cecilia, answering her look of doubt, "at least the general says so; he never knows our hands asunder. Well! I perceived that there was something hard inside—more than papers; and as I felt it, there came from it an uncommon perfume—a particular perfume, like what I used to have once, at the time—that time that I can never bear to think of, you know——"

"I know," said Helen, and in a low voice she added, "you mean about Colonel D'Aubigny."

"The perfume, and altogether I do not know what, quite overcame me. I had just sense enough to throw the packet from me: I made an effort, and reached the window, and I was trying to open the sash, I remember; but what happened immediately after that, I cannot tell you. When I came to myself, I was in my husband's arms; he was carrying me upstairs—and so much alarmed about me he was! O Helen, I do so love him! He laid me on the bed, and he spoke so kindly, reproaching me for not taking more care of myself—but so fondly! Somehow I could not bear it just then, and I closed my eyes as his met mine. He, I knew, could suspect nothing—but still! He stayed beside me, holding my hand: then dinner was ready; he had been twice summoned. It was a relief to me when he left me. Next, I believe, my mother came up, and felt my pulse, and scolded me for over-fatiguing myself, and for that leap; and I pleaded guilty, and it was all very well. I saw she had not an idea there was anything else. Mamma really is

not suspicious, with all her penetration—she is not suspicious."

"And why did you not tell her all the little you had to tell, dear Cecilia? If you had, long ago, when I begged of you to do so—if you had told your mother all about——"

"Told her!" interrupted Cecilia; "told my mother! —oh no, Helen!"

Helen sighed, and feebly said, "Go on."

"Well! when you were at dinner, it came into my poor head that the general would open that parcel before I could see you again, and before I could ask your advice and settle with you—before I could know what was to be done. I was so anxious, I sent for you twice."

"But Lady Davenant and the general forbade me to go to you."

"Yes"—Lady Cecilia said she understood that, and she had seen the danger of showing too much impatience to speak to Helen; she thought it might excite suspicion of her having something particular to say, she had therefore refrained from asking again. She was not asleep when Helen came to bed, though Felicie thought she was; she was much too anxious to sleep till she had seen her husband again; she was awake when he came into his room; she saw him come in with some letters and packets in his hand; by his look she knew all was still safe—he had not opened *that* particular packet—he held it among a parcel of military returns in his hand as he came to the side of the bed on tiptoe to see if she was asleep—to ask how she did; "He touched my pulse," said Lady Cecilia —"and I am sure he might well say it was terribly quick.

"Every instant I thought he would open that packet. He threw it, however, and all the rest, down on the

table, to be read in the morning, as usual, as soon as he awoke. After feeling my pulse again, the last thing, and satisfying himself that it was better—'Quieter now,' said he, he fell fast asleep, and slept so soundly, and I——"

Helen looked at her with astonishment, and was silent.

"Oh, speak to me!" said Lady Cecilia, "what do you say, Helen?"

"I say that I cannot imagine why you are so much alarmed about this packet."

"Because I am a fool, I believe," said Lady Cecilia, trying to laugh. "I am so afraid of his opening it."

"But why?" said Helen, "what do you think there is in it?"

"I have told you, surely! Letters—foolish letters of mine to that D'Aubigny. Oh, how I repent I ever wrote a line to him! And he told me, he absolutely swore, he had destroyed every note and letter I ever wrote to him. He was the most false of human beings!"

"He was a very bad man—I always thought so," said Helen; "but, Cecilia, I never knew that he had any letters of yours."

"Oh yes, you did, my dear, at the time; do not you recollect I showed you a letter, and it was you who made me break off the correspondence?"

"I remember your showing me several letters of his," said Helen, "but not of yours—only one or two notes—asking for that picture back again which he had stolen from your portfolio."

"Yes, and about the verses; surely you recollect my showing you another letter of mine, Helen?"

"Yes, but these were all of no consequence; there must be more, or you could not be so much afraid, Cecilia, of the general's seeing these, surely." At

this moment Lady Davenant's prophecy, all she had said about her daughter, flashed across Helen's mind, and with increasing eagerness she went on. "What is there in those letters that can alarm you so much?"

"I declare I do not know," said Cecilia, "that is the plain truth; I cannot recollect—I cannot be certain what there is in them."

"But it is not so long ago, Cecilia—only two years?"

"That is true, but so many great events have happened since, and such new feelings, all that early nonsense was swept out of my mind. I never really loved that wretch——"

A gleam of joy came across Helen's face.

"Never, never," repeated Lady Cecilia.

"Oh, I am happy still," cried Helen. "I told your mother I was sure of this."

"Good heavens! — Does she know about this packet?"

"No, no!—how could she? But what frightens you, my dear Cecilia? you say there is nothing wrong in the letters?"

"Nothing—nothing."

"Then make no wrong out of nothing," cried Helen. "If you break confidence with your husband, that confidence will never, never unite again—your mother says so."

"My mother!" cried Cecilia: "Good heavens!—so she does suspect?—tell me, Helen, tell me what she suspects."

"That you did not at first—before you were married, tell the general the whole truth about Colonel D'Aubigny."

Cecilia was silent.

"But it is not yet too late," said Helen earnestly; "you can set it all right now—this is the moment, my

dearest Cecilia. Do, do," cried Helen, "do tell him all—bid him look at the letters."

"Look at them! Impossible! Impossible!" said Lady Cecilia. "Bid me die rather."

She turned quite away.

"Listen to me, Cecilia;" she held her fast. "You must do it, Cecilia."

"Helen, I cannot."

"You can, indeed you can," said Helen, "only have courage *now*, and you will be happier all your life afterwards."

"Do not ask it—do not ask it—it is all in vain, you are wasting time."

"No, no—not wasting time; and in short, Cecilia, you must do what I ask of you, for it is right; and I will not do what you ask of me, for it is wrong."

"You will not!—You will not!" cried Lady Cecilia, breathless. "After all! You will not receive the packet for me! you will not let the general believe the letters to be yours! Then I am undone! You will not do it!—Then do not talk to me—do not talk to me—you do not know General Clarendon. If his jealousy were once roused, you have no idea what it would be."

"If the man were alive," said Helen, "but since he is dead——"

"But Clarendon would never forgive me for having loved another——"

"You said you did not love him."

"Nor did I ever *really* love that man; but still Clarendon, from even seeing those letters, might think I did. The very fact of having written such letters would be destruction to me with Clarendon. You do not know Clarendon. How can I convince you it is impossible for me to tell him? At the time he first proposed for me——oh! how I loved him, and feared

to lose him. One day my mother, when I was not by, said something—I do not know what, about a first love, let fall something about that hateful D'Aubigny, and the general came to me in such a state! Oh, Helen, in such a state! I thought it was all at an end. He told me he never would marry any woman on earth who had ever loved another. I told him I never had, and that was true, you know; but then I went a little beyond, perhaps. I said I had never THOUGHT of anybody else, for he made such a point of that. In short, I was a coward—a fool; I little foresaw—I laughed it off, and told him that what mamma had said was all a mistake, all nonsense; that Colonel D'Aubigny was a sort of universal flirt—and that was very true, I am sure; that he had admired us both, both you and me, but you last, you most, Helen, I said."

"Oh, Cecilia, how could you say so, when you knew he never cared for me in the least?"

"Forgive me, my dear, for there was no other way; and what harm did it do you, or what harm can it ever do you? It only makes it the easier for you to help me—to save me now. And Granville," continued Lady Cecilia, thinking that was the obstacle in Helen's mind, "and Granville need never know it."

Helen's countenance suddenly changed——"Granville! I never thought of that!" and now that she did think of it, she reproached herself with the selfishness of that fear. Till this moment, she knew her motives had been all singly for Cecilia's happiness; now the fear she felt of this some way hurting her with Beauclerc made her less resolute. Lady Cecilia saw her giving way, and hurried on—

"Oh, my dear Helen! I know I have been very wrong, but you would not quite give me up, would you?—Oh! for my mother's sake! Consider how it would be with my mother, so ill as you saw her!

I am sure if anything broke out now in my mother's state of health it would be fatal."

Helen became excessively agitated.

"Oh, Helen! would you make me the death of that mother?—Oh, Helen, save her! and do what you will with me afterwards. It will be only for a few hours—only a few hours!" repeated Lady Cecilia, seeing that these words made a great impression upon Helen—"Save me, Helen! save my mother."

She sank upon her knees, clasping her hands in an agony of supplication. Helen bent down her head and was silent—she could no longer refuse. "Then I must," said she.

"Oh, thank you! bless you!" cried Lady Cecilia in an ecstasy—"you will take the letters?"

"Yes," Helen feebly said; "yes, since it must be so."

Cecilia embraced her, thanked her, blessed her, and hastily left the room, but in an instant afterward she returned, and said, "One thing I forgot, and I must tell you. Think of my forgetting it! The letters are not signed with my real name, they are signed Emma—Henry and Emma!—Oh, folly, folly! My dear, dear friend! save me but now, and I never will be guilty of the least deception again during my whole life; believe me, believe me! When once my mother is safely gone I will tell Clarendon all. Look at me, dear Helen, look at me and believe me."

And Helen looked at her, and Helen believed her.

Chapter xxxi.

HELEN slept no more this night. When alone in the stillness of the long hours, she went over and over again all that had passed, what Cecilia had said, what she had at first thought and afterwards felt, all the persuasions by which she had been wrought upon, and, on the contrary, all the reasons by which she ought to be decided; backward and forward her mind vibrated, and its painful vacillation could not be stilled.

"What am I going to do? To tell a falsehood! That cannot be right; but in the circumstances—yet this is Cecilia's own way of palliating the fault that her mother so fears in her—that her mother trusted to me to guard her against; and now, already, even before Lady Davenant has left us, I am going to assist Cecilia in deceiving her husband, and on that very dangerous point—Colonel D'Aubigny." Lady Davenant's foreboding having already been so far accomplished struck Helen fearfully, and her warning voice in the dead silence of that night sounded, and her look was upon her, so strongly, that she for an instant hid her head to get rid of her image. "But what *can* I do? her own life is at stake! No less a motive could move me, but this ought—must—shall decide me. Yet, if Lady Davenant were to know it!—and I, in the last hours I have to pass with her—the last I ever may have with her, shall I deceive her? But it is not deceit, only prudence—necessary prudence; what a physician would order, what even humanity requires. I am satisfied it is quite right, quite, and I will go to sleep that I may be strong, and calm, and do it all well in the morning. After all, I have been too cowardly; frightening myself about nothing; too scrupulous—for what is it I

have promised? only to receive the letters as if they were mine. Not to *say* that they are mine; he will not ask me, Cecilia thinks he will not ask me. But how can she tell? if he should, what *can* I do? I must then answer that they are mine. Indeed it is the same thing, for I should lead him to believe it as much by my receiving them in silence; it will be telling or acting an absolute falsehood, and can that ever be right?" Back it came to the same point, and in vain her cheek settled on the pillow and she thought she could sleep. Then with closed eyes she considered how the general would look, and speak, or not speak. "What will he think of me when he sees the picture—the letters? for he must open the packet. But he will not read them, no, he is too honourable. I do not know what is in them. There can be nothing, however, but nonsense, Cecilia says; yet even so, love-letters he must know they are, and a clandestine correspondence. I heard him once express such contempt for any clandestine affair. He, who is so nice, so strict, about women's conduct, how I shall sink in his esteem! Well, be it so, that concerns only myself; and it is for his own sake too, to save his happiness; and Cecilia, my dear Cecilia, oh, I can bear it, and it will be a pride to me to bear it, for I am grateful; my gratitude shall not be only in words; now, when I am put to the trial, I can do something for my friends. Yes, and I will, let the consequences be what they may." Yet Beauclerc! that thought was at the bottom of her heart; the fear, the almost certainty, that some way or other—every way in which she could think of it, it would lead to difficulty with Beauclerc. But this fear was mere selfishness, she thought, and to counteract it came all her generous, all her grateful, all her long-cherished, romantic love of sacrifice—a belief that she was capable of self-devotion for the friends she loved; and upon

the strength of this idea she fixed at last. Quieted, she soothed herself to repose, and, worn out with reasoning or trying to reason in vain, she at last, in spite of the morning light dawning upon her through the unclosed shutters, in a soft sort of enthusiastic vision, fading away, fell asleep.

She slept long; when she awoke it was with that indescribable feeling that something painful had happened—that something dreadful was to be this day. She recollected, first, that Lady Davenant was to go. Then came all that had passed with Cecilia. It was late, she saw that her maid had been in the room, but had refrained from awakening her; she rose, and dressed as fast as she could. She was to go to Lady Davenant, when her bell rang twice. How to appear before one who knew her countenance so well, without showing that anything had happened, was her first difficulty. She looked in her glass to see whether there was any alteration in her face; none that she could see, but she was no judge. "How foolish to think so much about it all?" She dressed, and between times inquired from her maid if she had heard of any change in Lady Davenant's intentions of going. Had any counter-orders about the carriage been given? None; it was ordered to be at the door by twelve o'clock. "That was well," Helen said to herself. It would all soon be over. Lady Davenant would be safe, then she could bear all the rest; next she hoped, that any perturbation or extraordinary emotion in herself would not be observed in the hurry of departure, or would be thought natural at parting with Lady Davenant. "So then, I come at every turn to some little deceit," thought she, "and I must, I must!" and she sighed.

"It is a sad thing for you, ma'am, Lady Davenant's going away," said her maid.

Helen sighed again. "Very sad indeed." Suddenly a thought darted into her mind, that the whole danger might be avoided. A hope came that the general might not open the packet before Lady Davenant's departure, in which case Cecilia could not expect that she should abide by her promise, as it was only conditional. It had been made really on her mother's account; Cecilia had said that if once her mother was safe out of the house, she could then, and she would the very next day, tell the whole to her husband. Helen sprang from under the hands of her maid as she was putting up her hair behind, and ran to Cecilia's dressing-room, but she was not there. It was now her usual time for coming, and Helen left open the door between them, that she might go to her before Felicie should be rung for. She waited impatiently, but no Cecilia came. The time, to her impatience, seemed dreadfully long. But her maid observed, that as her ladyship had not been well yesterday, it was no wonder she was later this morning than usual.

"Very true, but there is somebody coming along the gallery now, see if that is Lady Cecilia."

"No, ma'am, Mademoiselle Felicie."

Mademoiselle Felicie said ditto to Helen's own maid, and, moreover, supposed her lady might not have slept well. Just then, one little peremptory knock at the door was heard.

"Bon Dieu! C'est Monsieur le Général!" exclaimed Felicie.

It was so—Felicie went to the door and returned with the general's compliments to Miss Stanley, and he begged to see her as soon as it might suit her convenience in the library, before she went into the breakfast-room, and after she should have seen Lady Cecilia, who wished to see her immediately.

Helen found Lady Cecilia in bed, looking as if she had been much agitated, two spots of carnation colour high up in her cheeks, a well-known sign in her of great emotion. "Helen!" she cried, starting up the moment Helen came in, "he has opened the packet, and you see me alive. But I do believe I should have died, when it came to the point, but for you—dearest Helen, I should have been, and still but for you I must be, undone—and my mother—oh! if he had gone to her!"

"What has happened? Tell me clearly, my dear Cecilia, and quickly, for I must go to General Clarendon; he has desired to see me as soon as I can after seeing you."

"I know, I know," said Cecilia, "but he will allow time, and you had better be some time with me, for he thinks I have all to explain to you this morning —and so I have, a great deal to say to you; sit down —quietly—Oh, if you knew how I have been agitated, I am hardly able yet to tell anything rightly." She threw herself back on the pillows, and drew a long breath, as if to relieve the oppression of mind and body. "Now I think I can tell it."

"Then do, my dear Cecilia—all—pray do! and exactly—oh, Cecilia, tell me all."

"Every word, every look, to the utmost, as far as I can recollect, as if you had been present. Give me your hand, Helen; how cool you are—delightful! but how you tremble!"

"Never mind," said Helen; "but how burning hot your hand is!"

"No matter. If ever I am well or happy again in this world, Helen, I shall owe it to you. After I left you I found the general fast asleep, I do not believe he had ever awoke—I lay awake for hours, till past five o'clock in the morning, I was wide awake—feverish,

But can you conceive it? just then, when I was most anxious to be awake, when I knew there was but one hour—not so much, till he would awake and read that packet, I felt an irresistible sleepiness come over me; I turned and turned, and tried to keep my eyes open, and pulled and pinched my fingers. But all would not do, and I fell asleep, dreaming that I was awake, and how long I slept I cannot tell you, so deep, so dead asleep I must have been; but the instant I did awake, I started up and drew back the curtain, and I saw—oh, Helen! there was Clarendon dressed—standing with his arms folded—a letter open hanging from his hand. His eyes were fixed upon me, waiting, watching for my first look: he saw me glance at the letter in his hand, and then at the packet on the table near the bed. For an instant neither of us spoke: I could not, nor exclaim even; but surprised, terrified, he must have seen I was. As I leaned forward, holding by the curtains, he pulled one of them suddenly back, threw open the shutters, and the full glare was upon my face. I shut my eyes—I could not help it—and shrank; but, gathering strength from absolute terror of his silence, I spoke; I asked, 'For Heaven's sake! Clarendon, what is the matter? Why do you look so?'

"Oh, that look of his! still fixed on me—the same as I once saw before we were married—once, and but once, when he came from my mother to me about this man. Well! I put my hands before my eyes; he stepped forward, drew them down, and placed the open letter before me, and then asked me, in a terrible sort of suppressed voice, 'Cecilia, whose writing is this?'

"The writing was before my eyes, but I literally could not see it—it was all a sort of maze. He saw I could not read it, and calmly bade me 'Take time—examine—is it a forgery?'

"A forgery!—that had never crossed my mind, and

for an instant I was tempted to say it was; but quickly I saw that would not do: there was the miniature, and that could not be a forgery. 'No,' I answered, 'I do not think it is a forgery.'

"'What then?' said he, so hastily that I could hardly hear; and before I could think what to answer, he said, 'I must see Lady Davenant.' He stepped towards the bell; I threw myself upon his arm—'Good heavens! do not, Clarendon, if you are not out of your senses.' 'I am not out of my senses, Cecilia, I am perfectly calm; answer me, one word only—is this your writing?' Oh! my dear Helen, then it was that you saved me."

"I!"

"Yes, forgive me, Helen. I answered, 'There is a handwriting so like, that you never can tell it from mine. Ask me no more, Clarendon,' I said.

"I saw a flash of light, as it were, come across his face—it was hope—but still it was not certainty. I saw this: oh! how quick one sees. He pointed to the first words of the letter, held his finger under them, and his hand trembled—think of his hand trembling! 'Read,' he said, and I read. How I brought myself to pronounce the words, I cannot imagine. I read what, as I hope for mercy, I had no recollection of ever having written—'My dear, too dear Henry.' 'Colonel D'Aubigny?' said the general. I answered, 'Yes.' He looked astonished at my self-possession—and so was I. For another instant his finger rested, pressing down there under the words, and his eyes on my face, as if he would have read into my soul. 'Ask me no more,' I repeated, scarcely able to speak; and something I said, I believe, about honour and not betraying you. He turned to the signature, and, putting his hand down upon it. asked, 'What name is signed to this letter?' I

answered, 'I have seen—I know—I believe it is Emma.'

"'You knew then of this correspondence?' was his next question. I confessed I did. He said that was wrong, 'but quite a different affair' from having been engaged in it myself, or some such word. His countenance cleared; that pale look of the forehead, the fixed purpose of the eye, changed. Oh! I could see—I understood it all with half a glance—saw the natural colour coming back, and tenderness for me returning—yet some doubt lingering still. He stood, and I heard some half-finished sentences. He said that you must have been very young at that time; I said, 'Yes, very young!'—'And the man was a most artful man,' he observed: I said, 'Yes, very artful.' That was true, I am sure. Clarendon then recollected that you showed some emotion one day when Colonel D'Aubigny was first mentioned—at that time, you know, when we heard of his death. I said nothing. The general went on: 'I could hardly have believed all this of Helen Stanley,' he said. He questioned no farther:—and oh! Helen, what do you think I did next? but it was the only thing left me to put an end to doubts, which, to *me*, must have been fatal—forgive me, Helen!"

"Tell me what you did," said Helen.

"Cannot you guess?"

"You told him positively that I wrote the letters?"

"No, not so bad, I never said that downright falsehood—no, I could not; but I did almost as bad."

"Pray tell me at once, my dear Cecilia."

"Then, in the first place, I stretched out my hand for the whole packet of letters which lay on the table untouched."

"Well?"

"Well, he put them into my hands and said, 'There

is no direction on these but to myself, I have not looked at any of them except this, which in ignorance I first opened; I have not read one word of any of the others."

"Well," said Helen, "and what did you do?"

"I said I was not going to read any of the letters, that I was only looking for—now, Helen, you know —I told you there was something hard in the parcel, something more than papers, I was sure what it must be—the miniature—the miniature of you, which I painted, you know, that I might have it when you were gone, and which *he* stole, and pretended before my mother to be admiring as your likeness, but he kept it only because it was my painting. I opened the paper in which it was folded; Clarendon darted upon it—'It is Helen!' and then he said, 'How like! how beautiful! how unworthy of that man!'

"But, oh, Helen, think of what an escape I had next. There was my name—my initials C. D. at the bottom of the picture, as the painter; and that horrible man, not content with his initials opposite to mine, had on the back written at full length, 'For Henry D'Aubigny.'—Clarendon looked at it, and said between his teeth, 'He is dead.'—'Thank God!' said I.

"Then he asked me, how I came to paint this picture for that man; I answered—oh, how happy then it was for me that I could tell the whole truth about that at least!—I answered that I did not do the picture for Colonel D'Aubigny; that it never was given to him; that he stole it from my portfolio, and that we both did what we could to get it back again from him, but could not. And that you even wanted me to tell my mother, but of that I was afraid; and Clarendon said, 'You were wrong there, my dear Cecilia.'

"I was so touched when I heard him call me his dear Cecilia again, and in his own dear voice, that I burst into tears. That was a great relief to me, and I kept saying over and over again, that I was wrong—very wrong indeed! and then he kneeled down beside me, and I so felt his tenderness, his confiding love for me—for me, unworthy as I am." The tears streamed from Lady Cecilia's eyes as she spoke—"Quite unworthy!"

"No, no, not quite unworthy," said Helen; "my poor dear Cecilia, what you must have felt!"

"Once!" continued Cecilia—"once! Helen, as my head was lying on his shoulder, my face hid, I felt so much love, so much remorse, and knowing I had done nothing really bad, I was tempted to whisper all in his ear. I felt I should be so much happier for ever—ever—if I could!"

"Oh that you had! my dear Cecilia, I would give anything upon earth for *your* sake, that you had."

"Helen, I could not—I could not. It was too late, I should have been undone if I had breathed but a word. When he even suspected the truth! that look—that voice was so terrible. To see it—hear it again! I could not—oh, Helen, it would have been utter ruin—madness. I grant you, my dear Helen, it might have been done at first, before I was married; oh, would to Heaven it had! but it is useless thinking of that now. Helen, my whole earthly happiness is in your hands, this is all I have to say, may I—may I depend on you?"

"Yes, yes, depend on me, my dearest Cecilia," said Helen; "now let me go."

Lady Cecilia held her one instant longer, to say that she had asked Clarendon to leave it to her to return the letters, "to save you the embarrassment, my dearest Helen; but he answered he must do this himself, and I did not dare to press the matter; but you need not be

alarmed, he will be all gentleness to you; he said, 'it is so different.' Do not be afraid."

"Afraid for myself?" said Helen; "oh no—rest, dear Cecilia, and let me go."

"Go then, go," cried Cecilia; "but for you what would become of my mother!—of me!—you save us all."

Believing this, Helen hastened to accomplish her purpose; resolved to go through with it, whatever it might cost. Her scruples vanished, and she felt a sort of triumphant pleasure in the courage of sacrificing herself.

Chapter xxxij.

GENERAL CLARENDON was sitting in the music-room, within the library, the door open, so that he could see Helen the moment she came in, and that moment he threw down his book as he rose, and their eyes met: hers fell beneath his penetrating glance; he came forward immediately to meet her, with the utmost gentleness and kindness in his whole appearance and manner, took her hand, and, drawing her arm within his, said, in the most encouraging voice, "Consider me as your brother, Helen; you know you have allowed me so to feel for you, and so, believe me, I do feel."

This kindness quite overcame her, and she burst into tears. He hurried her across the library, into the inner room, seated her, and when he had closed the door, stood beside her, and began, as if he had been to blame, to apologise for himself.

"You must have been surprised at my having opened letters which did not belong to me, but there was no direction, no indication that could stop me. They were

simply in a cover directed to me. The purpose of whoever sent them must have been to make me read them; the ultimate purpose was, I doubt not, to ruin Lady Cecilia Clarendon in my opinion."

"Or me," said Helen.

"No, Miss Stanley, no, that at all events cannot be," said the general. "Supposing the letters to be acknowledged by you, still it would be quite a different affair. But in the first place look at them, they may be forgeries. You will tell me if they are forgeries?"

And he placed the packet in her hands. Scarcely looking at the writing, she answered, "No, forgeries I am sure they are not." The general looked again at the direction of the cover, and observed, "This is a feigned hand. Whose can it be?"

Helen was on the brink of saying that Cecilia had told her it was like the writing of Carlos. Now this cover had not, to the general's knowledge, been seen by Cecilia, and that one answer might have betrayed all that she was to conceal, for he would instantly have asked how and when did Cecilia see it, and the cause of her fainting would have been then understood by him. Such hazards in every, even the first, least, step in falsehood; such hazard in this first moment! But she escaped this peril, and Helen answered: "It is something like the writing of the page Carlos, but I do not think all that direction is his. There seem to be two different hands. I do not know, indeed, how it is?"

"Some time or other it will come out," said the general. "I will keep this cover, it will lead to the detection of that boy, or of whoever it was that employed him."

To give her further time the general went on looking at the miniature, which he held in his hand. "This is a beautiful likeness," said he, "and not ill painted—by Cecilia, was not it?"

Helen looked at it, and answered, "Yes, by Cecilia."

"I am glad it is safe," said the general, "restored —Cecilia told me the history. I know that it was stolen, not given by you."

"Given!" said Helen. "Oh no! stolen."

"Base!" said the general.

"He was base," answered Helen.

General Clarendon held in his hand, along with the picture, one letter separated from the rest, open; he looked at it as if embarrassed, while Helen spoke the last words, and he repeated, "Base! yes, he certainly was, or he would have destroyed these letters."

Again Helen was on the point of saying that Colonel D'Aubigny had told Cecilia he had done so, but fortunately her agitation, in default of presence of mind, kept her silent.

"This is the first letter I opened," said the general, "before I was aware that they were not what I should read. I saw only the first words, I thought then that I had a right to read them. When these letters met my eyes, I conceived them to have been written by my wife. I had a right to satisfy myself respecting the nature of the correspondence; that done, I looked no farther. I bore my suspense—I waited till she awoke."

"So she told me, Cecilia has told me all; but even if she had not, in any circumstances who could doubt your honour, General Clarendon?"

"Then trust to it, Miss Stanley, for the past, for the future, trust to it! You gratify me more than I can express—you do me justice. I wished to return these letters to you with my own hand," continued he, "to satisfy myself, in the first place, that there was no mistake. Of that your present candour, indeed, the first look of that ingenuous countenance, was sufficient."

Helen felt that she blushed all over.

"Pardon me for distressing you, my dear Helen.

It was a matter in which a man MUST be selfish, *must* in point of honour, *must* in point of feeling. I owe to your candour not merely relief from what I could not endure and live, but relief from suspicion—suspicion of the truth of one dearer to me than life."

Helen sat as if she had been transfixed.

"I owe to you," continued he, "the happiness of my whole future life."

"Then I am happy," cried Helen, "happy in this, at all events, whatever may become of me."

She had not yet raised her eyes towards the general; she felt as if her first look must betray Cecilia; but she now tried to fix her eyes upon him as he looked anxiously at her, and she said, "Thank you, thank you, General Clarendon! Oh, thank you for all the kindness you have shown me; but I am the more grieved, it makes me more sorry to sink quite in your esteem."

"To sink! You do not: your candour, your truth raises you——"

"Oh! do not say that——"

"I do," repeated the general, "and you may believe me. I am incapable of deceiving you—this is no matter of compliment. Between friend and friend I should count a word, a look of falsehood, treason."

Helen's tears stopped, and, without knowing what she did, she began hastily to gather up the packet of letters which she had let fall; the general assisted her in putting them into her bag, and she closed the strings, thanked him, and was rising, when he went on—"I beg your indulgence while I say a few words of myself."

She sat down again immediately. "Oh! as many as you please."

"I believe I may say I am not of a jealous temper."

"I am sure you are not," said Helen.

"I thank you," said the general. "May I ask on what your opinion is founded?"

"On what has now passed, and on all that I have heard from Lady Davenant."

He bowed. "You may have heard, then, from Lady Davenant, of some unfortunate circumstances in my own and in a friend's family which happened a short time before my marriage?"

Helen said she had.

"And of the impression these circumstances made on my mind, my consequent resolve never to marry a woman who had ever had any previous attachment?"

Helen was breathless at hearing all this repeated.

"Were you informed of these particulars?" said the general.

"Yes," said Helen faintly.

"I am not asking, Miss Stanley, whether you approved of my resolution; simply whether you heard of it?"

"Yes—certainly."

"That's well. It was on an understanding between Cecilia and myself on this point, that I married. Did you know this?"

"Yes," said Helen.

"Some words," continued the general, "once fell from Lady Davenant concerning this Colonel D'Aubigny which alarmed me. Cecilia satisfied me that her mother was mistaken. Cecilia solemnly assured me that she had never loved him." The general paused.

Helen, conceiving that he waited for and required her opinion, replied, "So I always thought—so I often told Lady Davenant." But at this moment recollecting the words at the beginning of that letter, "My dear, too dear Henry," Helen's voice faltered.

The general saw her confusion, but attributed it to

her own consciousness. "Had Lady Davenant not been mistaken," resumed he, "that is to say, had there ever been—as might have happened not unnaturally—had there ever been an attachment; in short, had Cecilia ever loved him, and told me so, I am convinced that such truth and candour would have satisfied me, would have increased—as I now feel—increased my esteem. I am at this moment convinced that, in spite of my declared resolution, I should in perfect confidence have married."

"Oh, that Cecilia had but told him!" thought Helen.

"I should not, my dear Miss Stanley," continued the general, "have thus taken up your time talking of myself, had I not an important purpose in view. I was desirous to do away in your mind with the idea of my great strictness—not on my own account, but on yours, I wished to dispel this notion. Now you will no longer, I trust, apprehend that my esteem for you is diminished. I assure you I can make allowances."

She was shocked at the idea of allowances, yet thanked him for his indulgence, and she could hardly refrain from again bursting into tears.

"Still by your agitation I see you are afraid of me," said he, smiling.

"No indeed; not afraid of you, but shocked at what you must think of me."

"I am not surprised, but sorry to see that the alarm I gave my poor Cecilia this morning has passed from her mind into yours. To her I must have appeared harsh: I *was* severe; but when I thought I had been deceived, duped, can you wonder?"

Helen turned her eyes away.

"My dear Miss Stanley, why will not you distinguish? the cases are essentially different. Nine out of ten of the young ladies who marry in these countries

do not marry the first object of their fancy, and whenever there is, as there will be, I am sure, in your case, perfect candour, I do not apprehend the slightest danger to the happiness of either party. On the contrary, I should foretell an increase of esteem and love. Beauclerc has often——"

Beauclerc's voice was at this instant heard in the hall.

"Compose yourself, my dear Miss Stanley—this way," said the general, opening a door into the conservatory, for he heard Beauclerc's step now in the library. The general followed Helen as she left the room, and touching the bag that contained the letters, said—

"Remember, whatever may be your hurry, lock this up first."

"Thank you," answered she; "I will, I will!" and she hastened on, and in a moment she was safe across the hall and upstairs, without meeting any one, and in her own room, and the bag locked up in her cabinet. Lady Davenant's bell rang as she went to her apartment; she looked in at Cecilia, who started up in her bed.

"All is over," said Helen, "all is well. I have the letters locked up; I cannot stay."

Helen disengaged herself almost forcibly from Cecilia's embrace, and she was in Lady Davenant's room in another minute. She bade her good morning as composedly as she could, she thought quite as usual. But that was impossible: so much the better, for it would not have been natural this last morning of Lady Davenant's stay, when nothing was as usual externally or internally. All was preparation for departure—her maids packing—Lady Davenant making some last arrangements—in the midst of which she stopped to notice Helen—pressed her in her arms, and after looking

once in her face, said, "My poor child! it must be so."

Elliott interrupted, asking some question, purposely to draw off her attention; and while she turned about to give some orders to another servant, Elliott said to Miss Stanley, "My lady was not well last night; she must be kept from all that can agitate her, as much as possible."

Helen at that instant rejoiced that she had done what she had. She agreed with Elliott, she said, that all emotion which could be avoided should; and upon this principle busied herself, and was glad to employ herself in whatever she could do to assist the preparations, avoiding all conversation with Lady Davenant.

"You are right, my love—quite right," said Lady Davenant. "The best way is always to employ one's self always to the last. Yes, put up those drawings carefully, in this portfolio, Elliott; take silver paper, Helen."

They were Helen's own drawings, so all went on, and all was safe—even when Cecilia was spoken of; while the silver paper went over the drawings, Helen answered that she had seen her. "She was not well, but still not seriously ill, though——"

"Yes," said Lady Davenant; "only the general is too anxious about her—very naturally. He sent me word just now," continued she, "that he has forbidden her to get up before breakfast. I will go and see her now; dear Cecilia! I hope she will do well—every way—I feel sure of it, Helen—sure as you do yourself, my dear—But what is the matter?"

"Nothing!" said Helen. That was not quite true; but she could not help it—"Nothing!" repeated she. "Only I am anxious, my dear Lady Davenant," continued poor Helen, blundering, unaccustomed to evasions—"only I am very anxious you

should go soon to Cecilia; I know she is awake now, and you will be hurried after breakfast."

Elliott looked reproachfully at Miss Stanley, for she thought it much better for her lady to be engaged in more indifferent matters till after breakfast, when she would have but a few minutes to spend with her daughter; so Helen, correcting herself, added—"But perhaps I'm wrong, so do not let me interrupt you in whatever you are doing."

"My dear child," said Lady Davenant; "you do not know what you are saying or doing yourself this morning."

But no suspicion was excited in her mind, as she accounted for Helen's perturbation by the sorrow of their approaching separation, and by the hurry of her spirits at Beauclerc's arrival the day before. And then came the meeting the general at breakfast, which Helen dreaded; but so composed, so impenetrable was he, that she could hardly believe that anything could have occurred that morning to agitate him.

Lady Davenant, after being with her daughter, came to take leave of Helen, and said gravely, "Helen! remember what I said of Cecilia's truth, my trust is in you. Remember, if I never see you again, by all the love and esteem I bear you, and all which you feel for me, remember this my last request—prayer—adjuration to you, support, save Cecilia!"

At that moment the general came to announce that the carriage was ready; promptly he led her away, handed her in, and the order to "drive on" was given. Lady Davenant's last look, her last anxious smile, was upon Helen and Beauclerc as they stood beside each other on the steps, and she was gone.

Helen was so excessively agitated that Beauclerc did not attempt to detain her from hurrying to her own room, where she sat down and endeavoured to compose

herself. She repeated Lady Davenant's last words, "Support, save Cecilia," and, unlocking the cabinet in which she had deposited the fatal letters, she seized the bag that contained them, and went immediately to Cecilia. She was in her dressing-room, and the general sitting beside her on the sofa, upon which she was resting. He was sitting directly opposite to Helen as she entered; she started at the sight of him: his eye instantly fell upon the bag, and she felt her face suddenly flush. He took out his watch, said he had an appointment, and was gone before Helen raised her eyes.

"My dearest friend, come to me, come close to me," cried Cecilia, and throwing her arms round Helen, she said, "Oh, I am the happiest creature now!"

"Are you?" said Helen.

"Yes, that I am, and I thank you for it; how much I thank you, Helen, it is impossible to express, and better I love you than anything upon earth but Clarendon himself, my best friend, my generous Helen. Oh, Clarendon has been so kind, so very kind! so sorry for having alarmed me! He is a noble, charming creature. I love him a thousand times better than I ever did, am happier than I ever was! and all this I owe to you, dearest Helen. But I cannot get your eyes from that bag—what have you there?"

"The letters," said Helen.

"The letters!" exclaimed Cecilia, springing up, "give them to me," seizing and opening the bag. "Oh, that dreadful perfume! Helen, open the window and bolt the door, my dear—both doors."

While Helen was doing so, Cecilia struck one little quick blow on a taper-lighter; it flared, and when Helen turned, one of the letters was in flames, and Cecilia continued feeding the flame with them as fast as ever it could devour.

"Burn! burn! there, there!" cried she, "I would not look at any one of them again for the world; I know no more what is in them than if I had never written them, except those horrid, horrid words Clarendon saw and showed me. I cannot bear to think of it. There now," continued she, as they burned, "no one can ever know anything more about the matter: how glad I am to see them burning!—burnt! safe! The smell will go off in a minute or two. It is going,—yes, gone! is not it? Now we may breathe freely. But you look as if you did not know whether you were glad or sorry, Helen."

"I believe it was right; the general advised me to lock them up," said Helen, "but then——"

"Did he? how thoughtful of him! But better to burn them at once; I am sure it was not my fault that they were not long ago destroyed. I was assured by that abominable man—but no matter, we will never think of him again. It is done now—no, not completely yet," said she, looking close at the half white, half black burnt paper, in which words and whole lines still appeared in shrunken but yet quite legible characters. "One cannot be too careful," and she trampled on the burnt paper, and scattered the cinders. Helen was anxious to speak, she had something important to say, but hesitated; she saw that Cecilia's thoughts were so far from what she wanted to speak of that she could not instantly say it; she could not bear to overturn all Cecilia's present happiness, and yet said to herself, I must—I must—or what may happen hereafter? Then forcing herself to speak, she began, "Your mother is safe now, Cecilia."

"Oh yes, and thank you, thank you for that——"

"Then now, Cecilia—your promise."

"My promise!" Lady Cecilia's eyes opened in

unfeigned astonishment. "What promise?—Oh, I recollect, I promised—did I?"

"My dear Cecilia, surely you cannot have forgotten."

"How was it?"

"You know the reason I consented was to prevent the danger of any shock to Lady Davenant."

"Well, I know, but what did I promise?"

The words had in reality passed Lady Cecilia's lips at the time without her at all considering them as a promise, only as a means of persuasion to bring Helen to her point.

"What did I promise?" repeated she.

"You said, 'As soon as my mother is safe, as soon as she is gone, I will tell my husband all'—Cecilia, you cannot forget what you promised."

"Oh no, now I remember it perfectly, but I did not mean so soon. I never imagined you would claim it so soon: but some time I certainly will tell him all."

"Do not put it off, dearest Cecilia. It must be done—let it be done to-day."

"To-day!" Lady Cecilia almost screamed.

"I will tell you why," said Helen.

"To-day!" repeated Lady Cecilia.

"If we let the present *now* pass," continued Helen, "we shall lose both the power and the opportunity, believe me."

"I have not the power, Helen, and I do not know what you mean by the opportunity," said Cecilia.

"We have a reason now to give General Clarendon—a true good reason, for what we have done."

"Reason!" cried Lady Cecilia, "what can you mean?"

"That it was to prevent danger to your mother, and now she is safe; and if you tell him directly, he will see this was really so."

"That is true; but I cannot—wait till to-morrow, at least."

"Every day will make it more difficult. The deception will be greater, and less pardonable. If we delay, it will become deliberate falsehood, a sort of conspiracy between us," said Helen.

"Conspiracy! Oh, Helen, do not use such a shocking word, when it is really nothing at all."

"Then why not tell it?" urged Helen.

"Because, though it is nothing at all in reality, yet Clarendon would think it dreadful—though I have done nothing really wrong."

"So I say—so I know," cried Helen; "therefore——"

"Therefore let me take my own time," said Cecilia. "How can you urge me so, hurrying me so terribly, and when I am but just recovered from one misery, and when you had made me so happy, and when I was thanking you with all my heart."

Helen was much moved, but answered as steadily as she could. "It seems cruel, but indeed I am not cruel."

"When you had raised me up," continued Cecilia, "to dash me down again, and leave me worse than ever!"

"Not worse—no, surely not worse, when your mother is safe."

"Yes, safe, thank you—but oh, Helen, have you no feeling for your own Cecilia?"

"The greatest," answered Helen; and her tears said the rest.

"You, Helen! I never could have thought you would have urged me so!"

"O Cecilia! if you knew the pain it was to me to make you unhappy again—but I assure you it is for your own sake. Dearest Cecilia, let me tell you all that General Clarendon said about it, and then you will know my reasons." She repeated as quickly as she could all that had passed between her and the

general, and when she came to this declaration that, if Cecilia had told him plainly the fact before, he would have married with perfect confidence, and, as he believed, with increased esteem and love, Cecilia started up from the sofa on which she had thrown herself, and exclaimed—

"Oh that I had but known this at the time, and I *would* have told him."

"It is still time," said Helen.

"Time now?—impossible. His look this morning. Oh! that look!"

"But what is one look, my dear Cecilia, compared with a whole life of confidence and happiness?"

"A life of happiness! never, never for me; in that way at least, never."

"In that way and no other, Cecilia, believe me. I am certain you never could endure to go on concealing this, living with him you love so, yet deceiving him."

"Deceiving! do not call it deceiving, it is only suppressing a fact that would give him pain; and when he can have no suspicion, why give him that pain? I am afraid of nothing now but this timidity of yours—this going back. Just before you came in, Clarendon was saying how much he admired your truth and candour, how much he is obliged to you for saving him from endless misery; he said so to me, that was what made me so completely happy. I saw that it was all right for you as well as me, that you had not sunk, that you had risen in his esteem."

"But I must sink, Cecilia, in his esteem, and now it hangs upon a single point—upon my doing what I cannot do." Then she repeated what the general had said about that perfect openness which he was sure there would be in this case between her and Beauclerc. "You see what the general expects that I should do."

"Yes," said Cecilia; and then, indeed, she looked

much disturbed. "I am very sorry that this notion of your telling Beauclerc came into Clarendon's head—very, very sorry, for he will not forget it. And yet, after all," continued she, "he will never ask you point blank, 'Have you told Beauclerc?'—and still more impossible that he should ask Beauclerc about it."

"Cecilia!" said Helen, "if it were only for myself I would say no more; there is nothing I would not endure—that I would not sacrifice—even my utmost happiness."—She stopped, and blushed deeply.

"Oh, my dearest Helen! do you think I could let you ever hazard that? If I thought there was the least chance of injuring you with Granville!—I would do anything—I would throw myself at Clarendon's feet this instant."

"This instant—I wish he was here," cried Helen.

"Good heavens! do you?" cried Lady Cecilia, looking at the door with terror—she thought she heard his step.

"Yes, if you would but tell him—Oh, let me call him!"

"Oh no, no! Spare me—spare me, I cannot speak now. I could not utter the words; I should not know what words to use. Tell him if you will, I cannot."

"May I tell him?" said Helen eagerly.

"No, no—that would be worse; if anybody tells him it must be myself."

"Then you will now—when he comes in?"

"He is coming!" cried Cecilia.

General Clarendon came to the door—it was bolted.

"In a few minutes," said Helen. Lady Cecilia did not speak, but listened, as in agony, to his receding footsteps.

"In a few minutes, Helen, did you say?—then there is nothing for me now, but to die—I wish I could die—I wish I was dead."

Helen felt she was cruel, she began to doubt her own motives; she thought she had been selfish in urging Cecilia too strongly; and, going to her kindly, she said, "Take your own time, my dear Cecilia: only tell him —tell him soon."

"I will, I will indeed, when I can—but now I am quite exhausted."

"You are indeed," said Helen, "how cruel I have been!—how pale you are!"

Lady Cecilia lay down on the sofa, and Helen covered her with a soft India shawl, trembling so much herself that she could hardly stand.

"Thank you, thank you, dear, kind Helen; tell him I am going to sleep, and I am sure I hope I shall."

Helen closed the shutters—she had now done all she could; she feared she had done too much; and as she left the room, she said to herself—"Oh, Lady Davenant! if you could see!—if you knew—what it cost me!"

Chapter xxiii.

THE overwrought state of Helen's feelings was relieved by a walk with Beauclerc, not in the dressed part of the park, but in what was generally undiscovered country: a dingle, a bosky dell, which he had found out in his rambles, and which, though so little distant from the busy hum of men, had a wonderful air of romantic seclusion and stillness—the stillness of evening. The sun had not set; its rich, red light yet lingered on the still remaining autumn tints upon the trees. The birds hopped fearlessly from bough to bough, as if this sweet spot were all their own. The cattle were quietly grazing below, or slowly winding their way to the watering-place. By degrees, the

sounds of evening faded away upon the ear; a faint chirrup here and there from the few birds not yet gone to roost, and now only the humming of the flies over the water, were to be heard.

It was perfect repose, and Beauclerc and Helen sat down on the bank to enjoy it together. The sympathy of the woman he loved, especially in his enjoyment of the beauties of nature, was to Beauclerc an absolute necessary of life. Nor would he have been contented with that show taste for the picturesque, which is, as he knew, merely one of a modern young lady's many accomplishments. Helen's taste was natural, and he was glad to feel it so true, and for him here alone expressed with such peculiar heightened feeling, as if she had in all nature now a new sense of delight. He had brought her here, in hopes that she would be struck with this spot, not only because it was beautiful in itself, and his discovery, but because it was like another bushy dell and bosky bourne, of which he had been from childhood fond, in another place, of which he hoped she would soon be mistress. "Soon! very soon, Helen!" he repeated, in a tone which could not be heard by her with indifference. He said that some of his friends in London told him that the report of their intended union had been spread everywhere—(by Lady Katrine Hawksby probably, as Cecilia, when Lady Castlefort departed, had confided to her, to settle her mind about Beauclerc, that he was coming over as Miss Stanley's acknowledged lover). And since the report had been so spread, the sooner the marriage took place the better; at least, it was a plea which Beauclerc failed not to urge, and Helen's delicacy failed not to feel.

She sighed—she smiled. The day was named—and the moment she consented to be his, nothing could be thought of but him. Yet, even while he poured out all his soul—while he enjoyed the satisfaction there is

in perfect unreservedness of confidence, Helen felt a pang mix with her pleasure. She felt there was one thing *she* could *not* tell him: he who had told her everything—all his faults and follies. "Oh! why," thought she, "why cannot I tell him everything? I, who have no secrets of my own—why should I be forced to keep the secrets of another?" In confusion, scarcely finished, these ideas came across her mind, and she sighed deeply. Beauclerc asked why, and she could not tell him! She was silent; and he did not reiterate the indiscreet question. He was sure she thought of Lady Davenant; and he now spoke of the regret he felt that she could not be present at their marriage, and Lord Davenant too! Beauclerc said he had hoped that Lord Davenant, who loved Helen as if she were his own daughter, would have been the person to act as her father at the ceremony. But the general, his friend and hers, would now, Beauclerc said, give her to him; and would, he was sure, take pleasure in thus publicly marking his approbation of his ward's choice.

They rose, and going on down the path to the river's side, they reached a little cove where he had moored his boat, and they returned home by water—the moon just visible, the air so still; all so placid, so delightful, and Beauclerc so happy, that she could not but be happy; yes—quite happy too. They reached the shore just as the lamps were lighting in the house. As they went in, they met the general, who said, "In good time;" and he smiled on Helen as she passed.

"It is all settled," whispered Beauclerc to him; "and you are to give her away."

"With pleasure," said the general.

As Helen went upstairs, she said to herself, "I understand the general's smile; he thinks I have

followed his advice; he thinks I have told all—and I —I can only be silent."

There was a great dinner-party, but the general, not thinking Cecilia quite equal to it, had engaged Mrs Holdernesse, a relation of his own, to do the honours of the day.

Lady Cecilia came into the drawing-room in the evening; but, after paying her compliments to the company, she gladly followed the general's advice, and retired to the music-room: Helen went with her, and Beauclerc followed. Lady Cecilia sat down to play at ecarté with him, and Helen tuned her harp. The general came in for a few minutes, he said, to escape from two young ladies, who had talked him half-dead about craniology. He stood leaning on the mantel-piece, and looking over the game. Lady Cecilia wanted counters, and she begged Beauclerc to look for some which she believed he would find in the drawer of a table that was behind him. Beauclerc opened the drawer, but no sooner had he done so, than, in admiration of something he discovered there, he exclaimed, "Beautiful! beautiful! and how like!" It was the miniature of Helen, and besides the miniature, further back in the drawer, Lady Cecilia saw—how quick is the eye of guilty fear!—could it be?—yes—one of the fatal letters—*the* letter! Nothing but the picture had yet been seen by the general or by Beauclerc: Lady Cecilia stretched behind her husband, whose eyes were upon the miniature, and closed the drawer. It was all she could do, it was impossible for her to reach the letter.

Beauclerc, holding the picture to the light, repeated, "Beautiful! who did it? whom is it for? General, look! do you know it?"

"Yes, to be sure," replied the general; "Miss Stanley."

"You have seen it before?"

"Yes," said the general coldly.

"It is very like. Who did it?"

"I did it," cried Lady Cecilia, who now recovered her voice.

"You, my dear Lady Cecilia! Whom for? for me? is it for me?"

"For you? It may be, hereafter, perhaps."

"Oh, thank you, my dear Lady Cecilia!" cried Beauclerc.

"If you behave well, perhaps," added she.

The general heard in his wife's tremulous tone, and saw in her half confusion, half attempt at playfulness, only an amiable anxiety to save her friend, and to give her time to recover from her dismay. He at once perceived that Helen had not followed the course he had suggested; that she had not told Beauclerc, and did not intend that he should be told the whole truth. The general looked extremely grave; Beauclerc gave a glance round the room. "Here is some mystery," said he, now first seeing Helen's disconcerted countenance. Then he turned on the general a look of eager inquiry. "Some mystery, certainly," said he, "with which I am not to be made acquainted?"

"If there be any mystery," said the general, "with which you are not to be made acquainted, I am neither the adviser nor abettor. Neither in jest nor earnest am I ever an adviser of mystery."

While her husband thus spoke, Lady Cecilia made another attempt to possess herself of the letter. This time she rose decidedly, and, putting aside the little ecarté table which was in her way, pressed forward to the drawer, saying something about "counters." Her Cachemere caught on Helen's harp, and, in her eager spring forward, it would have been overset, but that the general felt, turned, and caught it.

"What are you about, my dear Cecilia?—what do you want?"

"Nothing, nothing, thank you, my dear; nothing now." Then she did not dare to open the drawer, or to let him open it, and anxiously drew away his attention by pointing to a footstool which she seemed to want.

"Could not you ask me for it, my dear, without disturbing yourself? What are men made for?"

Beauclerc, after a sort of absent effort to join in quest of the footstool, had returned eagerly to the picture, and looking at it more closely, he saw the letters C. D. written in small characters in one corner; and, just as his eye turned to the other corner, Lady Cecilia, recollecting what initials were there, started up and snatched it from his hand. "Oh, Granville!" cried she, "you must not look at this picture any more till I have done something to it." Beauclerc was trying to catch another look at it, when Cecilia cried out, "Take it, Helen! take it!" and she held it up on high; but as she held it, though she turned the face from him, she forgot, quite forgot that Colonel D'Aubigny had written his name on the back of the picture; and there it was in distinct characters such as could be plainly read at that height, "*For* Henry D'Aubigny." Beauclerc saw, and gave one glance at Helen. He made no further attempt to reach the picture. Lady Cecilia, not aware of what he had seen, repeated, "Helen! Helen! why don't you take it?—now! now!"

Helen could not stir. The general took the picture from his wife's hand, gave it to Miss Stanley, without looking at her, and said to Lady Cecilia, "Pray keep yourself quiet, Cecilia. You have done enough, too much to-day; sit down," said he, rolling her arm-chair close, and seating her. "Keep yourself quiet, I beg."—"I beg," in the tone of "I insist."

She sat down, but, catching a view of Beauclerc, was alarmed by his aspect—and Helen! her head was bent down behind the harp. Lady Cecilia did not know yet distinctly what had happened. The general pressed her to lean back on the cushions which he was piling up behind her. Beauclerc made a step towards Helen, but checking himself, he turned to the ecarté table. "Those counters, after all, that we were looking for——" As he spoke he pulled open the drawer. The general with his back to him was standing before Lady Cecilia, she could not see what Beauclerc was doing, but she heard the drawer open, and cried out, "Not there, Beauclerc; no counters there—you need not look there." But before she spoke, he had given a sudden pull to the drawer, which brought it quite out, and all the contents fell upon the floor, and there was the fatal letter, open, and the words "*My dear, too dear Henry*" instantly met his eyes; he looked no farther, but in that single glance the writing seemed to him to be Lady Cecilia's, and quick his eye turned upon her. She kept perfectly quiet, and appeared to him perfectly composed. His eye then darted in search of Helen; she had sunk upon a seat behind the harp. Through the harp-strings he caught a glimpse of her face, all pale—crimsoned it grew as he advanced: she rose instantly, took up the letter, and, without speaking or looking at any one, tore it to pieces. Beauclerc in motionless astonishment. Lady Cecilia breathed again. The general's countenance expressed, "I interfere no farther." He left the room; and Beauclerc, without another look at Helen, followed him.

For some moments after Lady Cecilia and Helen were left alone, there was a dead silence. Lady Cecilia sat with her eyes fixed upon the door through which her husband and Beauclerc had passed. She

thought that Beauclerc might return; but when she found that he did not, she went to Helen, who had covered her face with her hands.

"My dearest friend," said Lady Cecilia, "thank you! thank you!—you did the best that was possible!"

"O Cecilia!" exclaimed Helen, "to what have you exposed me?"

"How did it all happen?" continued Cecilia. "Why was not that letter burnt with the rest? How came it there? Can you tell me?"

"I do not know," said Helen, "I cannot recollect." But after some effort, she remembered that in the morning, while the general had been talking to her, she had in her confusion, when she took the packet, laid the picture and that letter beside her on the arm of the chair. She had, in her hurry of putting the other letters into her bag, forgotten this and the picture, and she supposed that they had fallen between the chair and the wall, and that they had been found and put into the table-drawer by one of the servants.

Helen was hastening out of the room, Cecilia detained her. "Do not go, my dear, for that would look as if you were guilty, and you know you are innocent. At the first sound of your harp Beauclerc will return—only command yourself for one hour or two."

"Yes, it will only be for an hour or two," said Helen, brightening with hope. "You will tell the general to-night. Do you think Granville will come back? Where is the harp key?—I dropped it—here it is." She began to tune the harp. Crack went one string—then another.

"That is lucky," said Lady Cecilia, "it will give you something to do, my love, if the people come in."

The aide-de-camp entered. "I thought I heard harp-strings going," said he.

"Several!—yes," said Lady Cecilia, standing full in his way.

"Inauspicious sounds for us! bad omens for my embassy.—Mrs Holdernesse sent me."

"I know," said Lady Cecilia, "and you will have the goodness to tell her that Miss Stanley's harp is unstrung."

"Can I be of any use, Miss Stanley?" said he, moving towards the harp.

"No, no," cried Lady Cecilia, "you are in my service—attend to me."

"Dear me, Lady Cecilia! I did not hear what you said."

"That is what I complain of—hear me now."

"I am all attention, I am sure. What are your commands?"

She gave him as many as his head could hold. A long message to Mrs Holdernesse, and to Miss Holdernesse and Miss Anna about their music-books, which had been left in the carriage, and were to be sent for, and duets to be played, and glees, for the major and Lady Anne Ruthven.

"Good heavens! I cannot remember any more," cried the aide-de-camp.

"Then go off, and say and do all that before you come back again," said Lady Cecilia.

"What amazing presence of mind you have!" said Helen. "How can you say so much, and think of everything!"

The aide-de-camp performed all her behests to admiration, and was rewarded by promotion to the high office of turner-over-general of the leaves of the music-books, an office requiring, as her ladyship remarked to Miss Holdernesse, prompt eye and ear, and all his distinguished gallantry. By such compliments she fixed him to the pianoforte, while his curiosity and all his

feelings, being subordinate to his vanity, were prevented from straying to Miss Stanley and her harp-stringing, a work still doing—still to do.

All the arrangements succeeded as Lady Cecilia's arrangements usually did. Helen heard the eternal buzz of conversation and the clang of instruments, and then the harmony of music, all as in a dream, or as at the theatre, when the thoughts are absent or the feelings preoccupied; and in this dreamy state she performed the operation of putting in the harp-strings quite well: and when she was at last called upon by Cecilia, who gave her due notice and time, she sat and played automatically, without soul or spirit—but so do so many others. It passed "charmingly," till a door softly opened behind her, and she saw the shadow on the wall, and some one stood, and passed from behind her. There was an end of her playing; however, from her just dread of making a scene, she commanded herself so powerfully, that, except her timidity, nothing was observed by the company, and that timidity was pitied by the good-natured Mrs Holdernesse, who said to her daughter, "Anne, we must not press Miss Stanley any more; she, who is always so obliging, is tired now." She then made way for Helen to pass, who, thanking her with such a look as might be given for a life saved, quitted the harp, and the crowd, closing behind her, happily thought of her no more. She retreated to the darkest part of the room, and sat down. She did not dare to look towards what she most wished to see. Her eyes were fixed upon the face of the young lady singing, and yet she saw not one feature of that face, while she knew, without looking, or seeming to look, exactly where Beauclerc stood. He had stationed himself in a doorway into the drawing-room; there, leaning back against the wall, he stood, and never stirred. Helen was so anxious to get one clear view of the expression of his

countenance, that at last she ventured to move a little, and from behind the broad back of a great man she looked: Beauclerc's eyes met hers. How different from their expression when they were sitting on the bank together but a few short hours before! He left the doorway instantly, and placed himself where Helen could see him no more.

Of all the rest of what passed this evening she knew nothing; she felt only a sort of astonishment at everybody's gaiety, and a sense of the time being intolerably long. She thought that all these people never would go away—that their carriages never would be announced. But before it came to that time, General Clarendon insisted upon Lady Cecilia's retiring. "I must," said he, "play the tyrant, Cecilia; you have done too much to-day—Mrs Holdernesse shall hold your place."

He carried Cecilia off, and Helen thought, or fancied, that he looked about for her. Glad to escape, she followed close behind. The general did not offer his arm or appear to notice her. When she came to the door leading to the staircase, there was Beauclerc, standing with folded arms, as in the music-room; he just bowed his head, and wished Lady Cecilia a good night, and waited, without a word, for Helen to pass, or not to pass, as she thought fit. She saw by his look that he expected explanation; but till she knew what Cecilia meant to do, how could she explain? To say nothing—to bear to be suspected—was all she could do, without betraying her friend. That word *betray*—that thought ruled her. She passed him: "Good night" she could not then say. He bowed as she passed, and she heard no "Good night"—no sound. And there was the general in the hall to be passed also, before she could reach the staircase up which Cecilia was going. When he saw Helen with a look of surprise—as it seemed to her, of disapproving surprise—he said,

"Are you gone, Miss Stanley?" The look, the tone, struck cold to her heart. He continued—"Though I drove Cecilia away, I did not mean to drive you away too. It is early."

"Is it? I thought it was very late."

"No—and if you *can*, I hope you will return." There was a meaning in his eye, which she well understood.

"Thank you," said she; "if I can certainly——"

"I hope you can, and will."

"Oh! thank you; but I must first——" see Cecilia, she was going to say, but, afraid of implicating her, she changed the sentence to—"I must first consider——"

"Consider! what the devil!" thought he, and his countenance was instantly angrily suited to the thought. Helen hesitated. "Do not let me detain—distress you farther, Miss Stanley, unavailingly; and since I shall not have the pleasure of seeing you again this evening," concluded he, in a constrained voice, "I have the honour to wish you a good night." He returned to the music-room.

Chapter xxxiv.

HELEN instantly went to Cecilia's room; Felicie was with her. Helen expected Lady Cecilia would dismiss her instantly; but mademoiselle was chattering. Helen had sometimes thought Cecilia let her talk too much, but to-night it was insufferable. Helen was too impatient, too anxious to bear it. "Cecilia, my dear, I want to speak to you alone, as soon as you can, in my own room."

"As soon as possible," Cecilia answered in a voice not natural. And she came, but not as soon as possible

—shut the door behind her, showing that she had not dismissed Felicie, and, with hair dishevelled, as if hastening back to her room, said, "I am in a hurry; the general ordered me to make haste, and not to be an hour undressing."

"I will not keep you a moment," said Helen. "I am in as great a hurry as you can be. Beauclerc is waiting for me."

"Waiting for you at this time of night! Oh! my dear, he cannot be standing there with his arms folded all this time."

Helen repeated what the general had said, and ended with, "I am determined to return."

"No, no," Lady Cecilia said. The general could not advise her going back at this time of night. And with rapidity and confusion, she poured out a multitude of dissuasive arguments, some contradicting the others. "At this time of night! The world is not gone, and Beauclerc is in the midst of them by this time, you may be sure. You don't think he is standing alone there all this time. You could not speak to him before all the world—don't attempt it. You would only expose yourself. You would make a scene at last—undo all, and come to disgrace, and ruin me and yourself. I know you would, Helen. And if you were to send for him—into the library—alone! the servants would know it—and the company gone! And after all, for you, my dear, to make the first advance to reconciliation! If he is angry—I don't think that would be quite—dignified; quite like you, Helen."

"The general thinks it right, and I am sure he would not advise anything improper—undignified. It does not signify, Cecilia, I am determined—I will go." Trembling, she grew absolutely desperate from fear. "I am afraid you have forgot your promise, Cecilia; you said that if I could bear it for one hour, it would

be over. Did you not promise me that if any difficulty came between me and——" She stopped short. She had felt indignant; but when she looked at Cecilia, and saw her tears, she could not go on.

"Oh, Helen!" cried Cecilia, "I do not ask you to pity me. You cannot know what I suffer—you are innocent—and I have done so wrong! You cannot pity me."

"I do, I do," cried Helen, "from the bottom of my heart. Only trust me, dear Cecilia; let me go down——"

Lady Cecilia sprang between her and the door. "Hear me! hear me, Helen! Do not go to-night, and, cost what it will—cost me what it may, since it has come to this between you, I will confess all this night—I will tell all to the general, and clear you with him and with Granville. What more can you ask?—what more can I do, Helen? And will you go?"

"No, no, my dear Cecilia. Since you promise me this, I will not go now."

"Be satisfied then, and rest—for me there is no rest;" so saying Cecilia slowly left the room.

Helen could not sleep: this was the second wretched night she had passed in that most miserable of all uncertainty—whether she was right or wrong.

In the morning, to Helen's astonishment, Cecilia's first words were about a dream—"Oh, my dear Helen, I have had such a dream! I do not usually mind dreams in the least, but I must own to you that this has made an impression! My dear, I can hardly tell it; I can scarcely bear to think of it. I thought that Clarendon and I were sitting together, and my hand was on his shoulder; and I had worked myself up—I was just going to speak. He was winding up his watch, and I leaned forward to see his

face better. He looked up—and it was not him: it was Colonel D'Aubigny come to life. The door opened, Clarendon appeared—his eyes were upon me; but I do not know what came afterwards; all was confusion and fighting. And then I was with that nurse my mother recommended, and an infant in her arms. I was going to take the child, when Clarendon snatched it, and threw it into the flames. Oh! I awoke with a scream!"

"How glad you must have been," said Helen, "to awake and find it was only a dream!"

"But when I screamed," continued Cecilia, "Clarendon started up, and asked if I was in pain. 'Not of body,' I said;—and then—oh, Helen! then I thought I would begin. 'Not of body,' I said, 'but of mind;' then I added, 'I was thinking of Helen and Beauclerc.' Clarendon said, 'So was I; but there is no use in thinking of it; we can do no good.'—'Then,' I said, 'suppose, Clarendon—only suppose that Helen, without saying anything, were to let this matter pass off with Beauclerc?'—Clarendon answered, 'It would not pass off with Beauclerc.'—'But,' said I, 'I do not mean without any explanation at all. Only suppose that Helen did not enter into any particulars, do not you think, Clarendon, that things would go on well enough?'—'No,' he said decidedly, 'no.'—'Do you mean,' said I, 'that things would not go on at all?'—'I do not say, not at all,' he answered; 'but *well* they would not go on.'"

"I am sure the general is right," said Helen.

"Then," continued Lady Cecilia, "then I put the question differently. I wanted to feel my way, to try whether I could possibly venture upon my own confession. 'Consider it this way, Clarendon,' I said. 'Take it for granted that Helen did somehow arrange that Beauclerc were to be satisfied without any formal

explanation.'—'Formal!' said he—'I will not say formal,' said I; 'but without a *full* explanation: in short, suppose that from mere timidity, Helen could not, did not, exactly tell him the whole before marriage —put it off till afterwards—then told him all candidly; do you think, Clarendon, that if you were in Beauclerc's place (I quite stammered when I came to this)—do you think you could pardon, or forgive, or esteem, or love,' I intended to end with, but he interrupted me with—'I do not know,' very shortly; and added, 'I hope this is not what Miss Stanley intends to do?'"

"Oh! what did you answer?" cried Helen.

"I said I did not know. My dear Helen, it was the only thing I could say. What would Clarendon have thought, after all my *supposes*, if I had said anything else? he must have seen the truth."

"And that he is not to see," said Helen: "and how false he must think me!"

"No, no; for I told him," continued Lady Cecilia, "that I was sure you wished always to tell the whole truth about everything, but that there might be circumstances where you really could not; and where I, knowing all the circumstances, could not advise it. He said, 'Cecilia, I desire you will not advise or interfere any farther in this matter. Promise me, Cecilia!' He spoke sternly, and I promised as fast as I could. 'Do nothing, say nothing more about it,' he repeated; and now, after that, could I go on, Helen?"

"No, indeed; I do not think you could. My dear Cecilia, I really think you could not," said Helen, much moved.

"And do you forgive me, my dear, good——" But seeing Helen change colour, Lady Cecilia, following her eye, and looking out of the window, started up, exclaiming, "There is Beauclerc; I see

him in my mother's walk. I will go to him this minute; yes, I will trust him—I will tell him all instantly."

Helen caught hold of her, and stopped her. Surprised, Cecilia said, "Do not stop me. I may never have the courage again if stopped now. Do not stop me, Helen."

"I must, Cecilia. General Clarendon desired you not to interfere in the matter."

"But this is not interfering, only interposing to prevent mischief."

"But, Cecilia," continued Helen eagerly, "another reason has just struck me."

"I wish reasons would not strike you. Let me go. Oh, Helen; it is for you."

"And it is for you I speak, Cecilia," said Helen, as fast as she could. "If you told Beauclerc, you never could afterwards tell the general; it would be a new difficulty. You know the general could never endure your having confessed this to any man but himself — trusted Beauclerc rather than your husband."

Cecilia stopped, and stood silent.

"My dear Cecilia," continued Helen, "you must leave me to my own judgment now;" and, breaking from Cecilia, she left the room. She hurried out to meet Beauclerc. He stopped on seeing her, and then came forward with an air of evident deliberation.

"Do you wish to speak to me, Miss Stanley?"

"Miss Stanley!" cried Helen; "is it come to this, and without hearing me?"

"Without hearing you, Helen! Was not I ready last night to hear you? Without hearing you! Have not you kept me in torture, the worst of tortures—suspense? Why did not you speak to me last night?"

"I could not."

"Why, why?"

"I cannot tell you," said she.

"Then I can tell you, Helen."

"You can!"

"And will. Helen, you could not speak to me till you had consulted—arranged—settled what was to be said—what not to be said—what told—what left untold."

Between each half sentence he darted looks at her, defying hers to contradict—and she could not contradict by word or look. "You could not speak," continued he passionately, "till you had well determined what was to be told—what left untold to me! To me, Helen, your confiding — devoted — accepted lover! for I protest before Heaven, had I knelt at the altar with you, Helen Stanley, not more yours, not more mine could I have deemed you—not more secure of your love and truth—your truth, for what is love without it!—not more secure of perfect felicity could I have been on earth than I was when we two sat together but yesterday evening on that bank. Your words—your looks—and still your looks—But what signify tears!—Tears, women's tears! Oh! what is woman!—and what is man that believes in her?—weaker still!"

"Hear me!—hear me!"

"Hear you!—No, Helen, do not now ask me to hear you.—Do not force me to hear you.—Do not debase, do not sully, that perfect image of truth.—Do not sink yourself, Helen, from that height at which it was my entranced felicity to see you. Leave me one blessed, one sacred illusion. No," cried he, with increasing vehemence, "say nothing of all you have prepared—not one arranged word conned over in your midnight and your morning consultations," pointing back to the window of her dressing-room, where he had seen her and Lady Cecilia.

"You saw—" Helen began.

"Yes.—Am I blind, think you?—I wish I were. Oh! that I could be again the believing, fond, happy dupe I was but yesterday evening!"

"Dupe!" repeated Helen. "But pour out all—all, dear Granville. Think—say—what you will—reproach—abuse me as you please. It is a relief—take it—for I have none to give."

"None!" cried he, his tone suddenly changing, "no relief to give!—What! have you nothing to say?—No explanation?—Why speak to me then at all?"

"To tell you so at once—to end your suspense—to tell you that I cannot explain. The midnight consultation and the morning were not to prepare for you excuse or apology, but to decide whether I could tell you the whole; and since that cannot be, I determined not to enter into any explanation, I am glad that you do not wish to hear any."

"Answer me one question," said he:—"that picture—did you give it to Colonel D'Aubigny?"

"No. That is a question I can answer. No—he stole it from Cecilia's portfolio. Ask me no more."

"One question more——"

"No, not one more—I cannot tell you anything more."

She was silent for a moment; he withdrew his eyes, and she went on.

"Granville! I must now put your love and esteem for me to the test. If that love be what I believe it to be; if your confidence in me is what I think it ought to be, I am now going to try it. There is a mystery which I cannot explain. I tell you this, and yet I expect you to believe that I am innocent of anything wrong but the concealment. There are circumstances which I cannot tell you."

"But why?" interrupted Beauclerc.—"Ought there

to be any circumstances which cannot be told to the man to whom you have plighted your faith? Away with this 'cannot—this mystery!' Did not I tell you every folly of my life—every fault? And what is this?—in itself, nothing!—concealment everything—Oh! Helen——"

She was going to say, "If it concerned only myself"—but that would at once betray Cecilia, and she went on—"If it were in my opinion right to tell it to you, I would. On this point, Granville, leave me to judge and act for myself. This is the test to which I put your love—put mine to any test you will, but if your confidence in me is not sufficient to endure this trial, we can never be happy together." She spoke very low; but Beauclerc listened with such intensity that he could not only distinguish every syllable she said, but could distinctly hear the beating of her heart, which throbbed violently, in spite of all her efforts to be calm. "Can you trust me?" concluded she.

"I can," cried he. "I can—I do! By Heaven I do! I think you an angel, and legions of devils could not convince me of the contrary. I trust your word—I trust that heavenly countenance—I trust entirely——" He offered, and she took his offered hand. "I trust entirely. Not one question more shall I ask—not a suspicion shall I have: you put me to the test, you shall find me stand it."

"Can you?" said she; "you know how much I ask. I acknowledge a mystery, and yet I ask you to believe that I am not wrong."

"I know," said he; "you shall see." And both in happiness once more, they returned to the house.

"I love her a thousand times better than ever," thought Beauclerc, "for the independence of mind she shows in thus braving my opinion, daring to set all upon the cast—something noble in this! I am to form my

own judgment of her, and I will, independently of what any other human being may say or think. The general, with his strict, narrow, conventional notions, has not an idea of the kind of woman I like, or of what Helen really is. He sees in Helen only the discreet proper-behaved young lady, adapted, so nicely adapted to her place in society, to nitch and notch in, and to be of no sort of value out of it. Give me a being able to stand alone, to think and feel, decide and act, for herself. Were Helen only what the general thinks her, she would not be for me; while she is what I think her, I love—I adore!" And when he saw his guardian, Beauclerc declared that, though Helen had entered into no explanations, he was perfectly satisfied.

The general answered, "I am glad you *are* satisfied."

Beauclerc perceived that the general was not; and in spite of all that he had just been saying to himself, this provoked and disgusted him. His theory of his own mind, if not quite false, was still a little at variance with his practice. His guardian's opinion swayed him powerfully, whenever he believed that it was not designed to influence him; when the opinion was repressed, he could not rest without drawing it out. "Then you think, general," said he, "that some explanation ought to have been made?"

"No matter what I think, Granville, the affair is yours. If you are satisfied, that is all that is necessary."

Then even, because left on their own point of suspension to vibrate freely, the diamond-scales of Beauclerc's mind began to move, from some nice, unseen cause of variation. "But," said he, "General Clarendon, no one can judge without knowing facts."

"So I apprehend," said the general.

"I may be of too easy faith," replied Beauclerc.—[No reply.] "This is a point of honour."—[No denial.] "My dear general, if there be anything

which weighs with you, and which you know and I do not, I think, as my friend and my guardian, you ought to tell it to me."

"Pardon me," said the general, turning away from Beauclerc as he spoke, and striking first one heel of his boot against the scraper at the hall-door, then the other —"pardon me, Granville, I cannot admit you to be a better judge than I am myself of what I ought to do or not to do."

The tone was dry and proud, but Beauclerc's provoked imagination conceived it to be also mysterious; the scales of his mind vibrated again, but he had said he would trust—trust entirely, and he would: yet he could not succeed in banishing all doubt, till an idea started into his head—"That writing was Lady Cecilia's! I thought so at the first moment, and I let it go again. It is hers, and Helen is keeping her secret:—but could Lady Cecilia be so ungenerous—so treacherous?" However, he had declared he would ask no questions; he was a man of honour, and he would ask none—none even of himself—a resolution which he found it surprisingly easy to keep when the doubt concerned only Lady Cecilia. Whenever the thought crossed his mind, he said to himself, "I will ask nothing, suspect nobody; but if it is Lady Cecilia's affair, it is all the more generous in Helen." And so, secure in this explanation, though he never allowed to himself that he admitted it, his trust in Helen was easy and complete, and his passion for her increased every hour.

But Lady Cecilia was disturbed even by the perfect confidence and happiness of Beauclerc's manner towards Helen. She could not but fear that he had guessed the truth; and it seemed as if everything which happened tended to confirm him in his suspicions; for, whenever the mind is strongly interested on any subject, something alluding to it seems wonderfully, yet accident-

ally, to occur in everything that we read, or hear in common conversation, and so it now happened; things were continually said by persons wholly unconcerned, which seemed to bear upon her secret. Lady Cecilia frequently felt this with pangs of confusion, shame, and remorse; and, though Beauclerc did not watch, or play the spy upon her countenance, he could not help sometimes observing the flitting colour—the guilty changes of countenance—the assumed composure: that mind, once so artless, began to be degraded—her spirits sank; she felt that she "had lost the sunshine of a soul without a mystery!"

The day fixed for the marriage approached; Lady Cecilia had undertaken the superintendence of the *trousseau*, and Felicie was in anxious expectation of its arrival. Helen had written to the Collingwoods to announce the intended event, asking for the good bishop's sanction, as her guardian, and regretting that he could not perform the ceremony. She had received from Lady Davenant a few lines, written just before she sailed, warm with all the enthusiasm of her ardent heart, and full of expectation that Helen's lot would be one of the happiest this world could afford. All seemed indeed to smile upon her prospects, and the only clouds which dimmed the sunshine were Cecilia's insincerity, and her feeling that the general thought her acting unhandsomely and unwisely towards his ward; but she consoled herself with the thought that she could not judge of what he did not know, that she did not deserve his displeasure, that Granville was satisfied, and if he was, why should not General Clarendon be so too? Much more serious, however, was the pain she felt on Cecilia's account. She reproached herself with betraying the trust Lady Davenant had reposed in her. That dreadful prophecy seemed now accomplishing: Cecilia's natural generosity, that for which Helen

had ever most loved and admired her, the brightest, fairest parts of her character, seemed failing now; what could be more selfish than Cecilia's present conduct towards herself, more treacherous to her noble-minded, her confiding husband! The openness, the perfect unreserve between the two friends, was no longer what it had been. Helen, however, felt the constraint between them the less as she was almost constantly with Beauclerc, and in her young happiness she hoped all would be right. Cecilia would tell the general, and they would be as intimate, as affectionate, as they had ever been.

One morning General Clarendon, stopping Cecilia as she was coming down to breakfast, announced that he was obliged to set off instantly for London, on business which could not be delayed, and that she must settle with Miss Stanley whether they would accompany him or remain at Clarendon Park. He did not know, he said, how long he might be detained.

Cecilia was astonished, and excessively curious; she tried her utmost address to discover what was the nature of his business, in vain. All that remained was to do as he required without more words. He left the room, and Cecilia decided at once that they had better accompany him. She dreaded some delay; she thought that, if the general went alone to town, he might be detained Heaven knows how long; and though the marriage must be postponed at all events, yet if they went with the general, the ceremony might be performed in town as well as at Clarendon Park; and she with some difficulty convinced Helen of this. Beauclerc feared nothing but delay. They were to go. Lady Cecilia announced their decision to the general, who immediately set off, and the others in a few hours followed him.

Chapter xxxv.

"In my youth, and through the prime of manhood, I never entered London without feelings of hope and pleasure. It was to me the grand theatre of intellectual activity, the field for every species of enterprise and exertion, the metropolis of the world, of business, thought, and action. There, I was sure to find friends and companions, to hear the voice of encouragement and praise. There, society of the most refined sort offered daily its banquets to the mind, and new objects of interest and ambition were constantly exciting attention either in politics, literature, or science."

THESE feelings, so well described by a man of genius, have probably been felt more or less by most young men who have within them any consciousness of talent, or any of that enthusiasm, that eager desire to have or to give sympathy, which, especially in youth, characterises noble natures. But after even one or two seasons in a great metropolis these feelings often change long before they are altered by age. Granville Beauclerc had already persuaded himself that he now detested, as much as he had at first been delighted with, a London life. From his metaphysical habits of mind, and from the sensibility of his temper, he had been too soon disgusted by that sort of general politeness which, as he said, takes up the time and place of real friendship; and as for the intellectual pleasures, they were, he said, too superficial for him; and his notions of independence, too, were at this time quite incompatible with the conventional life of a great capital. His present wish was to live all the year round in the country, with the woman he loved, and in the society of a few chosen friends. Helen quite agreed with him in his taste for the country; she had scarcely ever known any other life, and yet had always been happy; and whatever youthful curiosity had been awakened in her mind as to the pleasures of London, had been now

absorbed by stronger and more tender feelings. Her fate in life, she felt, was fixed, and wherever the man she loved wished to reside, that, she felt, must be her choice. With these feelings they arrived at General Clarendon's delightful house in town.

Helen's apartment, and Cecilia's, were on different floors, and had no communication with each other. It was of little consequence, as their stay in town was to be but short, yet Helen could not help observing that Cecilia did not express any regret at it, as formerly she would have done; it seemed a symptom of declining affection, of which, every the slightest indication was marked and keenly felt by Helen, the more so because she had anticipated that such must be the consequence of all that had passed between them, and there was now no remedy.

Among the first morning visitors admitted were Lady Castlefort and Lady Katrine Hawksby. They did not, as it struck Cecilia, seem surprised to see that Miss Stanley was Miss Stanley still, though the day for the marriage had been announced in all the papers as fixed; but they did seem now full of curiosity to know how it had come to pass, and there was rather too apparent a hope that something was going wrong. Their first inquisitive look was met by Lady Cecilia's careless glance in reply, which said better than words could express, "Nothing the matter, do not flatter yourselves." Then her expertness at general answers which gave no information, completely baffled the two curious impertinents. They could only learn that the day for the marriage was not fixed, that it could not be definitively named till some business should be settled by the general. Law business, they supposed, of course. Lady Cecilia "knew nothing about it. Lawyers are such provoking wretches, with their fast bind fast find. Such an unconscionable length of time

as they do take for their parchment doings, heeding nought of that little impatient flapper Cupid."

Certain that Lady Cecilia was only playing with their curiosity, yet unable to circumvent her, Lady Katrine changed the conversation, and Lady Castlefort preferred a prayer, which was, she said, the chief object of her visit, that Lady Cecilia and Miss Stanley would come to her on Monday; she was to have a few friends—a very small party, and independently of the pleasure she should have in seeing them, it would be advantageous perhaps to Miss Stanley, as Lady Castlefort, in her softest voice, added, "For from the marriage being postponed even for a few days, people might talk, and Mr Beauclerc and Miss Stanley appearing together would prevent anybody's thinking there was any little—— Nothing so proper now as for a young lady to appear with her *futur*; so I shall expect you, my dear Cecilia, and Miss Stanley"—and so saying, she departed. Helen's objections were all overruled, and when the engagement was made known to Beauclerc, he shrugged, and shrank, and submitted; observing, "That all men, and all women, must from the moment they come within the precincts of London life, give up their time and their will to an imaginary necessity of going when we do not like it, where we do not wish, to see those whom we have no desire to see, and who do not care if they were never to see us again, except for the sake of their own reputation of playing well their own parts in the grand farce of mock civility." Helen was sorry to have joined in making an engagement for him which he seemed so much to dislike. But Lady Cecilia, laughing, maintained that half his reluctance was affectation, and the other half a lover-like spirit of monopoly, in which he should not be indulged, and instead of pretending to be indifferent to what the world might

think, he ought to be proud to show Helen as a proof of his taste.

In dressing Helen this night, Felicie, excited by her lady's exhortations, displayed her utmost skill. Mademoiselle Felicie had a certain *petite métaphysique de toilette*, of which she was justly vain. She could talk, and as much to the purpose as most people of "le genre classique," and "le genre romantique," of the different styles of dress that suit different styles of face; and while "she worked and wondered at the work she made," she threw out from time to time her ideas on the subject to form the taste of Helen's little maid, Rose, who, in mute attention, held the light and assiduously presented pins. "Not your pin so fast one after de other, Miss Rose—Tenez! tenez!" cried mademoiselle. "You tink in England alway too much of your pin in your dress, too little of our taste —too little of our elegance, too much of your what you call *tidiness*, or God know what! But never you mind dat so much, Miss Rose; and you not prim up your little mouth, but listen to me. Never you put in one pin before you ask yourself, Miss Rose, what for I do it? In every toilette that has taste there is above all—tenez—a character—a sentiment to be support; suppose your lady is to be superbe, or she will rather be élégante, or charmante, or intéressante, or distinguée—well, dat is all ver' well, and you dress to that idée, one or oder—well, very well—but none of your wat you call *odd*. No, no, never, Miss Rose —dat is not style noble; 'twill only become de petit minois of your English originale. I wash my hands of dat always." The toilette superbe mademoiselle held to be the easiest of all those which she had named with favour, it may be accomplished by any common hands; but *head* is requisite to reach the toilette distinguée. The toilette superbe requires only cost—a toilette

distinguée demands care. There was a happiness as well as care in Felicie's genius for dress, which, ever keeping the height of fashion in view, never lost sight of nature, adapting, selecting, combining to form a perfect whole, in which art itself concealed appeared only, as she expressed it, in the sublime of simplicity. In the midst of all her talking, however, she went on with the essential business, and as she finished, pronounced "Précepte commence, exemple achève."

When they arrived at Lady Castlefort's, Lady Cecilia was surprised to find a line of carriages, and noise, and crowds of footmen. How was this? She had understood that it was to be one of those really small parties, those select reunions of some few of the high and mighty families who chance to be in town before Christmas.—"But how is this?" Lady Cecilia repeated to herself as she entered the hall, amazed to find it blazing with light, a crowd on the stairs, and in the anteroom a crowd, as she soon felt, of an unusual sort. It was not the soft crush of aristocracy, they found hard unaccustomed citizen elbows —strange round-shouldered, square-backed men and women, so over-dressed, so bejewelled, so coarse—shocking to see, impossible to avoid; not one figure, one face, Lady Cecilia had ever seen before; till at last, from the midst of the throng emerged a fair form —a being as it seemed of other mould, certainly of different caste. It was one of Cecilia's former intimates—Lady Emily Greville, whom she had not seen since her return from abroad. Joyfully they met, and stopped and talked; she was hastening away, Lady Emily said, "after having been an hour on duty; Lady Castlefort made it a point with her to stay after dinner, she had dined there and had stayed, and now guard was relieved."

"But who are all these people? What is all this, my dear Lady Emily?" asked Cecilia.

"Do not you know? Louisa has trapped you into coming, then, to-night without telling you how it is?"

"Not a word did she tell me, I expected to meet only our own world."

"A very different world you perceive this! A sort of farce this is to the 'Double Distress,' a comedy; —in short, one of Lord Castlefort's brothers is going to stand for the City, and citizens and citoyennes must be propitiated. When an election is in the case all other things give place: and, besides, he has just married the daughter of some amazing merchant, worth I don't know how many plums; so *le petit Bossu*, who is proud of his brother, for he is reckoned the genius of the family! made it a point with Louisa to do this. She put up her eyebrows, and stood out as long as she could, but Lord Castlefort had his way, for he holds the purse you know—and so she was forced to make a party for these Goths and Vandals, and of course she thought it best to do it directly, out of season, you know, when nobody will see it—and she consulted me whether it should be large or small; I advised a large party, by all means, as crowded as possible."

"Yes, yes, I understand," said Cecilia; "to hide the shame in the multitude; vastly well, very fair all this, except the trapping us into it, who have nothing to do with it."

"Nothing to do with it! pardon me," cried Lady Emily. "It could not have been done without us. Entrapping us!—do not you understand that we are the baits to the traps? Bringing those animals here, wild beasts or tame, only to meet one another, would have been 'doing business no how.' We are what they are 'come for to see,' or to have it to say that they have

seen the Exclusives, Exquisites, or Transcendentals, or whatever else they call us."

"Lady Emily Greville's carriage!" was now called in the anteroom.

"I must go, but first make me known to your friend Miss Stanley, you see I know her by instinct;" but "Lady Emily Greville's carriage!" now resounded reiteratedly, and gentlemen with cloaks stood waiting, and as she put hers on, Lady Emily stooped forward and whispered—

"I do not believe one word of what they say of her," and she was off, and Lady Cecilia stood for an instant looking after her, and considering what she could mean by those last words. Concluding, however, that she had not heard aright, or had missed some intervening name, and that these words, in short, could not possibly apply to Helen, Lady Cecilia turned to her, they resumed their way onward, and at length they reached the grand reception-room.

In the middle of that brilliantly lighted saloon, immediately under the centre chandelier, was ample verge and space enough reserved for the *élite* of the world; circle it was not, nor square, nor form regularly defined, yet the bounds were guarded. There was no way of getting to the further end of the saloon, or to the apartments open in the distance beyond it, except by passing through this enclosed space, in which one fair entrance was practicable, and one ample exit full in view on the opposite side. Several gentlemen of fashionable bearing held the outposts of this privileged place, at back of sofa, or side of fauteuil, stationary, or wandering near. Some chosen few were within; two caryatides gentlemen leaned one on each side of the fireplace, and in the centre of the rug stood a remarkably handsome man, of fine figure, perfectly dressed, his whole air exquisitely scornful, excruciatingly miserable, and loftily

abstract. 'Twas wonderful, 'twas strange, 'twas passing strange! how one so lost to all sublunary concerns, so far above the follies of inferior mortals, as he looked, came here—so extremely well-dressed too! How happened it? so nauseating the whole, as he seemed, so wishing that the business of the world were done! With half-closed dreamy eyelids he looked silent down upon two ladies who sat opposite to him, rallying, abusing, and admiring him to his vanity's content. They gave him his choice of three names, l'Ennuyé, le Frondeur, or le Blasé. L'Ennuyé? he shook his head; too common; he would have none of it. Le Frondeur? no; too much trouble; he shrugged his abhorrence. Le Blasé? he allowed, might be too true. But would they hazard a substantive verb? He would give them four-and-twenty hours to consider, and he would take twenty-four himself to decide. They should have his definitive to-morrow, and he was sliding away, but Lady Castlefort, as he passed her, cried, "Going, Lord Beltravers, going are you?" in an accent of surprise and disappointment; and she whispered, "I am hard at work here, acting receiver-general to these city worthies; and you do not pity me—cruel!" and she looked up with languishing eyes, that so begged for sympathy. He threw upon her one look of commiseration, reproachful. "Pity you, yes! But why will you do these things? and why did you bring me here to do this horrid sort of work?" and he vanished.

Lady Cecilia Clarendon and Miss Stanley now appeared in the *offing*, and now reached the straits: Lady Castlefort rose with vivacity extraordinary, and went forward several steps. "Dear Cecilia! Miss Stanley, so good! Mr Beauclerc, so happy! the general could not! so sorry!" Then with hand pressed on hers, "Miss Stanley, so kind of you to come. Lady Grace,

give me leave—Miss Stanley—Lady Grace Bland," and in a whisper, "Lord Beltravers' aunt."

Lady Grace, with a haughty drawback motion, and a supercilious arching of her brows, was "happy to have the honour." Honour nasally prolonged, and some guttural sounds followed, but further words, if words they were, which she syllabled between snuffling and mumbling, were utterly unintelligible; and Helen, without being "very happy," or happy at all, only returned bend for bend.

Lady Cecilia then presented her to a group of sister graces standing near the sofas of mammas and chaperons —not each a different grace, but similar each, indeed upon the very same identical pattern air of young-lady fashion—well-bred, and apparently well-natured. No sooner was Miss Stanley made known to them by Lady Cecilia, than, smiling just enough, not a muscle too much, they moved; the ranks opened softly, but sufficiently, and Helen was in the group; amongst them, but not *of* them—and of this she became immediately sensible, though without knowing how or why. One of these daughters had had expectations last season from having been frequently Mr Beauclerc's partner, and the mother was now fanning herself opposite to him. But Helen knew nought of this: to her all was apparently soft, smooth, and smiling. While, whenever any of the unprivileged multitude, the city monsters, passed near this high-born, high-bred group, they looked as though the rights of pride were infringed, and, smiling scorn, they dropped from half-closed lips such syllables of withering contempt, as they thought these vulgar victims merited: careless if they heard or not, rather rejoicing to see the sufferers wince beneath the wounds which they inflicted in their pride and pomp of sway. "Pride!" thought Helen, "was it pride?" If pride it was, how unlike what she had

been taught to consider the proper pride of aristocracy; how unlike that noble sort which she had seen, admired, and loved! Helen fancied what Lady Davenant would have thought; how ignoble, how mean, how vulgar she would have considered these sneers and scoffs from the nobly to the lowly born. How unworthy of their rank and station in society! They who ought to be the first in courtesy, because the first in place.

As these thoughts passed rapidly in Helen's mind, she involuntarily looked towards Beauclerc; but she was so encompassed by her present companions that she could not discover him. Had she been able to see his countenance, she would have read in it at once how exactly he was at that instant feeling with her. More indignant than herself, for his high chivalrous devotion to the fair could ill endure the readiness with which the gentlemen, attendants at ottoman or sofa, lent their aid to mock and to embarrass every passing party of the city tribe, mothers and their hapless daughter-train.

At this instant Lady Bearcroft, who, if she had not good breeding, certainly had good-nature, came up to Beauclerc, and whispered earnestly, and with an expression of strong interest in her countenance, "As you love her, do not heed one word your hear anybody say this night, for it's all on purpose to vex you; and I am certain as you are it's all false—all envy. And there she goes, Envy herself in the black jaundice," continued she, looking at Lady Katrine Hawksby, who passed at that instant.

"Good heavens!" cried Beauclerc, "what can——"

"No, no," interrupted Lady Bearcroft, "no, no, do not ask—better not; best you should know no more—only keep your temper whatever happens. Go you up the hill, like the man in the tale, and let the black stones bawl themselves hoarse—dumb. Go you

on, and seize your pretty singing, thinking bird—the sooner the better. So fare you well."

And she disappeared in the crowd. Beauclerc, to whom she was perfectly unknown (though she had made him out), totally at a loss to imagine what interest she could take in Helen or in him, or what she could possibly mean, rather inclined to suppose she was a mad woman, and he forgot everything else as he saw Helen with Lady Cecilia emerging from the bevy of young ladies and approaching him. They stopped to speak to some acquaintance, and he tried to look at Helen as if he were an indifferent spectator, and to fancy what he should think of her if he saw her now for the first time. He thought that he should be struck not only with her beauty, but with her graceful air—her ingenuous countenance, so expressive of the freshness of natural sensibility. She was exquisitely well dressed too, and that, as Felicie observed, goes for much, even with your most sensible men. Altogether he was charmed, whether considering her as with the eyes of an unbiassed stranger or with his own. And all he heard confirmed, and, although he would not have allowed it, strengthened his feelings. He heard it said that, though there were some as handsome women in the room, there were none so interesting; and some of the young men added, "As lovely as Lady Blanche, but with more expression." A citizen, with whom Beauclerc could have shaken hands on the spot, said, "There's one of the high-breds, now, that's well-bred too." In the height of the rapture of his feelings he overtook Lady Cecilia, who telling him that they were going on to another room, delivered Helen to his care, and herself taking the arm of some ready gentleman, they proceeded as fast as they could through the crowd to the other end of the room.

This was the first time Helen had ever seen Lady Cecilia in public, where certainly she appeared to great advantage. Not thinking about herself, but ever willing to be pleased; so bright, so gay, she was sunshine which seemed to spread its beams wherever she turned. And she had something to say to everybody, or to answer quick to whatever they said or looked, happy always in the *àpropos* of the moment. Little there might be, perhaps, in what she said, but there was all that was wanted, just what did for the occasion. In others there often appeared a distress for something to say, or a dead dulness of countenance opposite to you. From others, a too fast hazarded broadside of questions and answers—glads and sorrys in chain-shots that did no execution, because there was no good aim—congratulations and condolences playing at cross purposes.—These were mistakes, misfortunes, which could never occur in Lady Cecilia's natural grace and acquired tact of manner. Helen was amused, as she followed her, in watching the readiness with which she knew how to exchange the necessary counters in the commerce of society: she was amused, till her attention was distracted by hearing, as she and Beauclerc passed, the whispered words —"*I promessi sposi*—look—*La belle fiancée.*" These words were repeated as they went on, and Lady Cecilia heard some one say, "I thought it was broken off; that was all slander then?" She recollected Lady Emily's words, and, terrified lest Helen should hear more of—she knew not what, she began to talk to her as fast as she could, while they were stopped in the doorway by a crowd. She succeeded for the moment with Helen; she had not heard the last speech, and she could not, as long as Lady Cecilia spoke, hear more; but Beauclerc again distinguished the words "*Belle fiancée;*" and as he turned to

discover the speaker, a fat matron near him asked, "Who is it?" and the daughter answered, "It is that handsome girl, with the white rose in her hair." —"Hush!" said the brother, on whose arm she leaned; "Handsome is that handsome does."

Handsome does! thought Beauclerc: and the mysterious warning of his unknown friend recurred to him. He was astonished, alarmed, furious; but the whispering party had passed on, and just then Lady Cecilia descrying Mr Churchill in the distance, she made towards him. Conversation sure to be had in abundance from him. He discerned them from afar, and was happily prepared both with a ready bit of wit and with a proper greeting. His meeting with Lady Cecilia was, of course, just the same as ever. He took it up where he left off at Clarendon Park; no difference, no hiatus. His bow to Beauclerc and Helen, to Helen and Beauclerc, joined in one little sweep of a congratulatory motion, was incomparable: it said everything that a bow could say, and more. It implied such a happy freedom from envy or jealousy; such a polite acquiescence in the decrees of fate; such a philosophic indifference; such a cool sarcastic superiority to the event; and he began to Lady Cecilia with one of his prepared impromptus: "At the instant your ladyship came up, I am afraid I started, actually in a trance, I do believe. Methought I was—where do you think? In the temple of Jaggernaut."

"Why?" said Lady Cecilia, smiling.

"Methought," continued Horace, "that I was in the temple of Jaggernaut—that one strange day in the year, when all castes meet, when all distinction of castes and ranks is forgotten—the abomination of mixing them all together permitted, for their sins no doubt—high caste and low, from the abandonded Paria to the Brahmin prince, from their Billingsgate and Farringdon Without,

suppose, up to their St James's Street and Grosvenor Square, mingle, mingle, ye who mingle may, white spirits and grey, black spirits and blue. Now, pray look around: is not this Jaggernaut night with Lady Castlefort?"

"And you," said Lady Cecilia, "are not you the great Jaggernaut himself, driving over all in your triumphant chariot of sarcasm, and crushing all the victims in your way?"

This took place with Horace; it put him in spirits, in train, and he fired away at Lady Castlefort, whom he had been flattering *à l'outrance* five minutes before.

"I so admire that acting of sacrifice in your *belle cousine* to-night! Pasta herself could not do it better. There is a look of 'Oh, ye just gods! what a victim am I!' and with those upturned eyes so charming! Well, and seriously it is a sad sacrifice. Fathers have flinty hearts by parental prescription; but husbands—*petit Bossus* especially—should have mercy for their own sakes; they should not strain their marital power too far."

"But," said Lady Cecilia, "it is curious, that one born and bred such an ultra exclusive as Louisa Castlefort, should be obliged after her marriage immediately to open her doors and turn ultra liberale, or an universal suffragist—all in consequence of these *mésalliances*."

"True, true," said Churchill, with a solemn, pathetic shake of the head. "Gentlemen and noblemen should consider before they make these low matches to save their studs, or their souls, or their entailed estates. Whatever be the necessity, there can be no apology for outraging all *bienséance*. Necessity has no law, but it should have some decency. Think of bringing upon a foolish elder brother—But we won't be personal."

"No, don't, pray, Horace," said Lady Cecilia, moving on.

"But think, only think, my dear Lady Cecilia; think what it must be to be '*How-d'ye-doed*,' and to be 'dear sistered' by such bodies as these in public."

"Sad! sad!" said Lady Cecilia.

"The old French nobility," continued Churchill, "used to call these low money-matches, 'mettre du fumier sur nos terres.'"

"Dirty work at best," said Lady Cecilia.

"But still," said Horace, "it might be done with decency if not with majesty."

"But in the midst of all this," said Lady Cecilia, "I want some ice very much for myself, and for Helen more."

"I have a notion we shall find some here," replied he, "if you will come on this way—in this *sanctum sanctorum* of Lady Katrine's."

He led them on to a little inner apartment, where, as he said, Lady Katrine Hawksby and her set do always scandal take, and sometimes tea.—"Tea and *ponch*," continued he, "you know, in London now is quite *à la Française*, and it is astonishing to me, who am but a man, what strong punch ladies can take."

"Only when it is iced," said Lady Cecilia, smiling.

"Be it so," said he—"very refreshing ice, and more refreshing scandal, and here we have both in perfection. Scandal, hot and hot, and ice, cold and cold."

By this time they had reached the entrance to what he called Lady Katrine's *sanctum sanctorum*, where she had gathered round the iced punch and tea-table a select party, whom she had drawn together with the promise of the other half of a half-published report—a report in which "*I promessi sposi*" and "*La belle fiancée*" were implicated!

"Stop here one moment," cried Churchill, "one moment longer. Let us see before we are seen. Look in, look in, pray, at this group. Lady Katrine herself

on the sofa, finger up—holding forth; and the deaf old woman stretching forward to hear, while the other, with the untasted punch, sits suspended in curiosity. 'What can it be?' she says, or seems to say. Now, now, see the pretty one's hands and eyes uplifted, and the ugly one, with that look of horror, is exclaiming, 'You don't say so, my dear Lady Katrine!' Admirable creatures! Cant and scandal personified! I wish Wilkie were here—worth any money to him."

"And he should call it 'The Scandal Party,'" said Lady Cecilia. "He told me he never could venture upon a subject unless he could give it a good name."

At this moment Lady Katrine, having finished her story, rose, and awaking from the abstraction of malice, she looked up and saw Helen and Lady Cecilia, and, as she came forward, Churchill whispered between them, "Now—now we are going comfortably to enjoy, no doubt, Madame de Sevigné's pleasure 'de mal dire du prochain,' at the right hour too."

Churchill left them there. Lady Katrine welcoming her victims—her unsuspicious victims—he slid off to the friends round the tea-table to learn from "Cant" what "Scandal" had been telling. Beauclerc was gone to inquire for the carriage. The instant Helen appeared, all eyes were fixed upon her, and "*Belle fiancée*" was murmured round, and Cecilia heard—"He's much to be pitied."

At this moment Lord Castlefort went up to Helen; she had always been a favourite of his; he was grateful to her for her constant kindness to him, and, peevish though the little man might be, he had a good heart, and he showed it now by instantly taking Helen out of the midst of the starers, and begging her opinion upon a favourite picture of his, a Madonna.—Was it a Raffaelle, or was it not? He and Mr Churchill, he said, were at issue about it. In short, no matter

what he said, it engrossed Helen's attention, so that she could not hear anything that passed, and could not be seen by the starers; and he detained her in conversation till Beauclerc came to say—"The carriage is ready, Lady Cecilia is impatient." Lord Castlefort opened a door that led at once to the staircase, so that they had not to recross all the rooms, but got out immediately. The smallest service merits thanks, and Helen thanked Lord Castlefort by a look which he appreciated.

Even in the few words which Beauclerc had said as he announced the carriage, she had perceived that he was agitated, and, as he attended her in silence down the stairs, his look was grave and preoccupied; she saw he was displeased, and she thought he was displeased with her. When he had put them into the carriage, he wished them good night.

"Are not you coming with us?" cried Lady Cecilia.

"No, he thanked her, he had rather walk, and," he added—"I shall not see you at breakfast—I am engaged."

"Home!" said Lady Cecilia, drawing up the glass with a jerk.

Helen looked out anxiously. Beauclerc had turned away, but she caught one more glance of his face as the lamp flared upon it—she saw, and she was sure that—— "Something is very much the matter—I am certain of it."

"Nonsense, my dear Helen," said Lady Cecilia; "the matter is, that he is tired to death, as I am sure I am."

"There's more than that," said Helen, "he is angry"—and she sighed.

"Now, Helen, do not torment yourself about nothing," said Cecilia, who, not being sure whether Beauclerc had heard anything, had not looked at his countenance or remarked his tone; her mind was occupied with what had passed while Helen was

looking at the Madonna. Lady Cecilia had tried to make out the meaning of these extraordinary starings and whisperings—Lady Katrine would not tell her anything distinctly, but said, "Strange reports—so sorry it had got into the papers, those vile libellous papers; of course she did not believe—of Miss Stanley. After all, nothing very bad—a little awkward only—might be hushed up. Better not talk of it to-night; but I will try, Cecilia, in the morning, to find those paragraphs for you." Lady Cecilia determined to go as early as possible in the morning, and make out the whole; and, had she plainly told this to Helen, it would have been better for all parties: but she continued to talk of the people they had seen, to hide her thoughts from Helen, who all the time felt as in a feverish dream, watching the lights of the carriage flit by like fiery eyes, while she thought only of the strange words she had heard and why they should have made Beauclerc angry with her.

At last they were at home. As they went in, Lady Cecilia inquired if the general had come in?—Yes, he had been at home for some time, and was in bed. This was a relief. Helen was glad not to see any one, or to be obliged to say anything more that night. Lady Cecilia bade her "be a good child, and go to sleep." How much Helen slept may be left to the judgment of those who have any imagination.

Chapter xxvi.

"MILADI *a une migraine affreuse* this morning," said Felicie, addressing herself on the stairs to Rose. "*Mille amitiés de sa part* to your young lady, Miss Rose, and *miladi* recommended to

her to follow a good example, and to take her breakfast in her bed, and then to take one good sleep till you shall hear *midi sonné*."

Miss Stanley, however, was up and dressed at the time when this message was brought to her, and a few minutes afterwards a footman came to the door, to give notice that the general was in the breakfast-room, waiting to know whether Miss Stanley was coming down or not. The idea of a *tête-à-tête* breakfast with him was not now quite so agreeable as it would have been to her formerly, but she went down. The general was standing with his back to the fire, newspapers hanging from his hand, his look ominously grave. After "Good mornings" had been exchanged with awful solemnity, Helen ventured to hope that there was no bad public news.

"No public news whatever," said the general.

Next, she was sorry to hear that Cecilia had "such a bad headache."

"Tired last night," said the general.

"It was, indeed, a tiresome, disagreeable party," said Helen, hoping this would lead to how so? or why? but the general drily answered, "Not the London season," and went on eating his breakfast in silence.

Such a constraint and awe came upon her, that she felt it would be taking too great a liberty, in his present mood, to put sugar and cream into his tea, as she was wont in happier times. She set sugar-bowl and cream before him, and whether he understood, or noticed not her feelings, she could not guess. He sugared, and creamed, and drank, and thought, and spoke not. Helen put out of his way a supernumerary cup, to which he had already given a push, and she said, "Mr Beauclerc does not breakfast with us."

"So I suppose," said the general, "as he is not here."

"He said he was engaged to breakfast."

"With some of his friends, I suppose," said the general.

There the dialogue came to a full stop, and breakfast, uncomfortably on her part, and with a preoccupied air on his, went on in absolute silence. At length the general signified to the servant who was in waiting, by a nod, and a look towards the door, that his further attendance was dispensed with. At another time Helen would have felt such a dismissal as a relief, for she disliked, and recollected that her uncle particularly disliked, the fashion of having servants waiting at a family breakfast, which he justly deemed unsuited to our good old English domestic habits; but somehow it happened that at this moment she was rather sorry when the servant left the room. He returned, however, in a moment, with something which he fancied to be yet wanting; the general, after glancing at whatever he had brought, said, "That will do, Cockburn; we want nothing more."

Cockburn placed a skreen between him and the fire; the general put it aside, and, looking at him, said sternly —"Cockburn, no intelligence must ever go from my house to any newspapers."

Cockburn bowed—"None shall, sir, if I can prevent it; none ever did from me, general."

"None must ever go from any one in my family—look to it."

Cockburn bowed again respectfully, but with a look of reservation of right of remonstrance, answered by a look from his master, of "No more must be said." Yet Cockburn was a favourite; he had lived in the family from the time he was a boy. He moved hastily towards the door, and having turned the handle, rested upon it and said, "General, I cannot answer for others."

"Then, Cockburn, I must find somebody who can."

Cockburn disappeared, but after closing the door the veteran opened it again, stood, and said stoutly, though seemingly with some impediment in his throat—"General Clarendon, do me the justice to give me full powers."

"Whatever you require: say, such are your orders from me, and that you have full power to dismiss whoever disobeys." Cockburn bowed, and withdrew satisfied.

Another silence, when the general hastily finishing his breakfast, took up the newspaper, and said, "I wished to have spared you the pain of seeing these, Miss Stanley, but it must be done now. There have appeared in certain papers, paragraphs alluding to Beauclerc and to you; these scandalous papers I never allow to enter my house, but I was informed that there were such paragraphs, and I was obliged to examine into them. I am sorry to find that they have some of them been copied into my paper to-day."

He laid the newspaper before her. The first words which struck her eye were the dreaded whispers of last night; the paragraph was as follows:—

"In a few days will be published the Memoirs of the late Colonel D' * * * *, comprising anecdotes, and original love-letters; which will explain the mysterious allusions lately made in certain papers to '*La belle fiancée*,' and '*I promessi sposi*."

"What!" exclaimed Helen; "the letters! published!"

The general had turned from her as she read, and had gone to his writing-desk, which was at the furthest end of the room; he unlocked it, and took from it a small volume, and turning over the leaves as he slowly approached Helen, he folded down some pages, laid the volume on the table before her, and then said, "Before you look into these scandalous memoirs, Miss Stanley,

let me assure you, that nothing but the necessity of being empowered by you to say what is truth and what is falsehood, could determine me to give you this shock."

She was scarcely able to put forward her hand; yet took the book, opened it, looked at it, saw letters which she knew could not be Cecilia's, but turning another leaf, she pushed it from her with horror. It was the letter beginning with "My dear—too dear Henry."

"In print!" cried she; "in print! published!"

"Not published yet, that I hope to be able to prevent," said the general.

Whether she heard, whether she could hear him, he was not certain, her head was bent down, her hands clasping her forehead. He waited some minutes, then sitting down beside her, with a voice of gentleness and of commiseration, yet of steady determination, he went on—"I *must* speak, and you *must* hear me, Helen, for your own sake, and for Beauclerc's sake."

"Speak," cried she, "I hear."

"Hear then the words of a friend, who will be true to you through life—through life and death, if you will be but true to yourself, Helen Stanley—a friend who loves you as he loves Beauclerc; but he must do more, he must esteem you as he esteems Beauclerc, incapable of anything that is false."

Helen listened with her breath suspended, not a word in reply.

"Then I ask——"

She put her hand upon his arm, as if to stop him; she had a foreboding that he was going to ask something that she could not, without betraying Cecilia, answer.

"If you are not yet sufficiently collected, I will wait; take your own time—My question is simple—I ask you to tell me whether *all* these letters are yours or not!"

"No," cried Helen, "these letters are not mine?"

"Not all," said the general; "this first one I know

to be yours, because I saw it in your handwriting; but I am certain all cannot be yours: now will you show me which are, and which are not."

"I will take them to my own room, and consider and examine."

"Why not look at them here, Miss Stanley?"

She wanted to see Cecilia, she knew she could never answer the question without consulting her, but that she could not say; still she had no other resource, so, conquering her trembling, she rose and said, "I would rather go to——"

"Not to Cecilia," said he; "to that I object: what can Cecilia do for you? what can she advise, but what I advise, that the plain truth should be told?"

"If I could! Oh if I could!" cried Helen.

"What can you mean? Pardon me, Miss Stanley, but surely you can tell the plain fact; you can recollect what you have written—at least you can know what you have not written. You have not yet even looked beyond a few of the letters—pray be composed—be yourself. This business it was that brought me to town. I was warned by that young lady, that poetess of Mr Churchill's whom you made your friend by some kindness at Clarendon Park—I was warned that there was a book to come out, these Memoirs of Colonel D'Aubigny, which would contain letters said to be yours, a publication that would be highly injurious to you. I need not enter into details of the measures I consequently took; but I ascertained that Sir Thomas D'Aubigny, the elder brother of the colonel, knows nothing more of the matter than that he gave a manuscript of his brother's, which he had never read, to be published: the rest is a miserable intrigue between booksellers and literary manufacturers, I know not whom; I have not been able to get to the bottom of it; sufficient for my present purpose I know, and must tell you.

You have enemies who evidently desire to destroy your reputation, of course to break your marriage. For this purpose the slanderous press has been set at work, the gossiping part of the public has had its vile curiosity excited, the publication of this book is expected in a few days: this is the only copy yet completed, I believe, and this I could not get from the bookseller till this morning: I am now going to have every other copy destroyed directly."

"Oh my dear, dear friend, how can I thank you?" Her tears gushed forth.

"Thank me not by words, Helen, but by actions; no tears, summon your soul—be yourself."

"Oh if I could but retrieve one false step!"—she suddenly checked herself.

He stood aghast for an instant, then recovering himself as he looked upon her and marked the nature of her emotion, he said: "There can be no false step that you could ever have taken that cannot be retrieved. There can have been nothing that is irretrievable, except falsehood."

"Falsehood! No," cried she, "I will not say what is false—therefore I will not say anything."

"Then since you cannot speak," continued the general, "will you trust me with the letters themselves? Have you brought them to town with you?"

"The original letters?"

"Yes, those in the packet which I gave to you at Clarendon Park."

"They are burned."

"All?—one, this first letter I saw you tear; did you burn all the rest?"

"They are burned," repeated she, colouring all over. She could not say "I burned them."

He thought it a poor evasion. "They are burned," continued he, "that is, you burned them: unfortunate.

I must then recur to my first appeal. Take this pencil, and mark, I pray you, the passages that are yours. I may be called on to prove the forgery of these passages: if you do not show me, and truly, which are yours, and which are not, how can I answer for you, Helen?"

"One hour," said Helen, "only leave me for one hour, and it shall be done."

"Why this cowardly delay?"

"I ask only one hour—only leave me for one hour."

"I obey, Miss Stanley, since it must be so. I am gone."

He went, and Helen felt how sunk she was in his opinion—sunk for ever, she feared! but she could not think distinctly, her mind was stunned; she felt that she must wait for somebody, but did not at first recollect clearly that it was for Cecilia. She leaned back on the sofa, and sank into a sort of dreamy state. How long she remained thus unconscious she knew not; but she was roused at last by the sound, as she fancied, of a carriage stopping at the door: she started up, but it was gone, or it had not been. She perceived that the breakfast things had been removed, and, turning her eyes upon the clock, she was surprised to see how late it was. She snatched up the pages which she hated to touch, and ran upstairs to Cecilia's room—door bolted;—she gave a hasty tap—no answer; another louder, no answer. She ran into the dressing-room for Felicie, who came with a face of mystery, and the smile triumphant of one who knows what is not to be known. But the smile vanished on seeing Miss Stanley's face.

"Bon Dieu! Miss Stanley—how pale! mais qu'est ce que c'est? Mon Dieu, qu'est ce que c'est donc?"

"Is Lady Cecilia's door bolted withinside?" said Helen.

"No, only lock by me," said Mademoiselle Felicie. "Miladi charge me not to tell you she was not dere. And I had de presentiment you might go up to look for her in her room. Her head is got better quite. She is all up and dress; she is gone out in the carriage, and will soon be back, no doubt. I know not to where she go, but in my opinion to my Lady Katrine. If you please, you not mention I say dat, as miladi charge me not to speak of dis to you. *Apparemment quelque petit mystère.*"

Poor Helen felt as if her last hope was gone, and now in a contrary extreme from the dreamy torpor in which she had been before, she was seized with a nervous impatience for the arrival of Cecilia, though whether to hope or fear from it, she did not distinctly know. She went to the drawing-room, and listened and listened, and watched and watched, and looked at the clock, and felt a still increasing dread that the general might return before Lady Cecilia, and that she should not have accomplished her promise. She became more and more impatient. As it grew later, the rolling of carriages increased, and their noise grew louder, and continually as they came near she expected that one would stop at the door. She expected and expected, and feared, and grew sick with fear long deferred. At last one carriage did stop, and then came a thundering knock—louder, she thought, than usual; but before she could decide whether it was Cecilia or not, the room door opened, and the servant had scarcely time to say, that two ladies who did not give their names had insisted upon being let up—when the two ladies entered. One in the extreme of foreign fashion, but an Englishwoman, of assured and not prepossessing appearance; the other, half hid behind her companion, and all timidity, struck Helen as the most beautiful creature she had ever beheld.

"A thousand pardons for forcing your doors," said the foremost lady; "but I bear my apology in my hand: a precious little box of Roman cameos from a friend of Lady Cecilia Clarendon's, which I was desired to deliver myself."

Helen was, of course, sorry that Lady Cecilia was not at home.

"I presume I have the honour of speaking to Miss Stanley," continued the assured lady, and she gave her card, "Comtesse de St Cymon." Then half-turning to the beauty, who now became visible—"Allow me to *mention*—Lady Blanche Forrester."

At that name Helen did not start, but she felt as if she had received an electric shock. How she went through the necessary forms of civility she knew not; but even in the agony of passion the little habits of life hold their sway. The customary motions were made, and words pronounced; yet when Helen looked at that beautiful Lady Blanche, and saw how beautiful! there came a spasm at her heart.

The comtesse, in answer to a look towards a chair, did not "choose to sit down—could not stay—would not intrude on Miss Stanley." So they stood, Helen supporting herself as best she could, and preserving, apparently, perfect composure, seeming to listen to what farther Madame de St Cymon was saying; but only the sounds reached her ear, and a general notion that she spoke of the box in her hand. She gave Helen some message to Lady Cecilia, explanatory of her waiting or not waiting upon her ladyship, to all which Helen answered with proper signs of civility; and while the comtesse was going on, she longed to look again at Lady Blanche, but dared not. She saw a half curtsey and a receding motion; and she knew they were going, and she curtsied mechanically. She felt inexpressible relief when Madame de St Cymon

turned her back and moved towards the door. Then Helen looked again at Lady Blanche, and saw again her surpassing beauty and perfect tranquillity. The tranquillity gave her courage, it passed instantaneously into herself, through her whole existence. The comtesse stopped in her way out, to look at a china-table. "Ha! beautiful! Sêvre!—enamel—by Jaquetot, is it not?"

Helen was able to go forward, and answer to all the questions asked. Not one word from the Lady Blanche; but she wished to hear the sound of her voice. She tried—she spoke to her; but to whatever Helen said, no answer came, but the sweetest of smiles. The comtesse, with easy assurance and impertinent ill-breeding, looked at all that lay in her way, and took up and opened the miniature pictures that were on the table. "Lady Cecilia Clarendon — charming! — Blanche, you never saw her yet. Quite charming, is it not?"

Not a word from Lady Blanche, but a smile, a Guido smile. Another miniature taken up by the curious comtesse. "Ah! very like indeed! not flattered though. Do you know it, Blanche—eh?"

It was Beauclerc. Lady Blanche then murmured some few words indistinctly, in a very sweet voice, but showed no indication of feeling, except, as Helen gave one glance, she thought she saw a slight colour, like the inside of a shell, delicately beautiful; but it might be only the reflection from the crimson silk curtain near which she stood: it was gone, and the picture put down; and in a lively tone from the comtesse "*Au revoir,*" and exit, a graceful bend from the silent beauty, and the vision vanished.

Helen stood for some moments fixed to the spot where they left her. She questioned her inmost thoughts. "Why was I struck so much, so strangely,

with that beauty—so painfully? It cannot be envy; I never was envious of any one, though so many I have seen so much handsomer than myself. Jealousy? surely not; for there is no reason for it—no possibility of danger. Yet now, alas! when he has so much cause to doubt me! perhaps he might change. He seemed so displeased last night, and he has never been here all the morning!" She recollected the look and accent of Madame de St Cymon, as she said the words "*Au revoir.*" Helen did not like the words, or the look. She did not like anything about Madame de St Cymon: "Something so assured, so impertinent! And all that unintelligible message about those cameos!—a mere excuse for making this unseasonable pushing visit—just pushing for the acquaintance. The general will never permit it, though—that is one comfort. But why do I say comfort?" Back went the circle of her thoughts to the same point.—"What can I do?—the general will return, he will find I have not obeyed him. But what can be done till Cecilia returns? If she were but here, I could mark—we could settle. O Cecilia! where are you? But," thought she, "I had better look at the whole. I will have courage to read these horrible letters." To prevent all hazard of further interruption, she now went into an inner room, bolted the doors, and sat down to her dreaded task. And there we leave her.

Chapter xxxvii.

THAT Fortune is not nice in her morality, that she frequently favours those who do not adhere to truth more than those who do, we have early had occasion to observe. But whether Fortune may

not be in this, as in all the rest, treacherous and capricious; whether she may not by her first smiles and favours lure her victims on to their cost, to their utter undoing at last, remains to be seen.

It is time to inquire what has become of Lady Cecilia Clarendon. Before we follow her on her very early morning visit to her cousin's, we must take leave to pause one moment to remark, not in the way of moralising by any means, but simply as a matter of history, that the first little fib in which Lady Cecilia, as a customary licence of speech, indulged herself the moment she awoke this morning, though it seemed to answer its purpose exactly at the time, occasioned her ladyship a good deal of superfluous toil and trouble during the course of the day. In reply to the first question her husband had asked, or in evasion of that question, she had answered, "My dear love, don't ask me any questions, for I have such a horrid headache, that I really can hardly speak."

Now a headache, such as she had at that moment, certainly never silenced any woman. Slighter could not be—scarce enough to swear by. There seemed no great temptation to prevarication either, for the general's question was not of a formidable nature, not what the lawyers call a leading question, rather one that led to nothing. It was only, "Had you a pleasant party at Lady Castlefort's last night, my dear Cecilia?" But with that prescience with which some nicely foresee how the truth, seemingly most innocent, may do harm, her ladyship foreboded that, if she answered straight forward—"no"—that might lead to—why? how? or wherefore?—and this might bring out the history of the strange rude manner in which *la belle fiancée* had been received. That need not necessarily have followed, but, even if it had, it would have done her no harm—rather would have served at once her purpose in the

best manner possible, as time will show. Her husband, unsuspicious man, asked no more questions, and only gave her the very advice she wished him to give, that she should not get up to breakfast—that she should rest as long as she could. Farther, as if to forward her schemes, even without knowing them, he left the house early, and her headache conveniently going off, she was dressed with all despatch—carriage at the door as soon as husband out of sight, and away she went, as we have seen, without Helen's hearing, seeing, or suspecting her so well contrived and executed project.

She was now in good spirits. The infection of fear which she had caught, perhaps from the too sensitive Helen, last night, she had thrown off this morning. It was a sunny day, and the bright sunshine dispelled, as ever with her, any black notions of the night, all melancholy ideas whatsoever. She had all the constitutional hopefulness of good animal spirits. But though no fears remained, curiosity was as strong as ever. She was exceedingly eager to know what had been the cause of all these strange appearances. She guessed it must be some pitiful jealousy of Lady Katrine's—some poor spite against Helen. Anything that should really give Beauclerc uneasiness, she now sincerely believed to be out of the question. Nonsense—only Helen and Beauclerc's love of tormenting themselves—quite nonsense! And nonsense! three times ejaculated, quite settled the matter, and assured her in the belief that there could be nothing serious to be apprehended. In five minutes she should be at the bottom of all things, and in half-an-hour return triumphant to Helen, and make her laugh at her cowardly self. The carriage rolled on, Lady Cecilia's spirits rising as she moved rapidly onwards, so that by the time she arrived at Lady Castlefort's she was not only in good but in high spirits. To her askings,

"Not at home" never echoed. Even at hours undue, such as the present, she, privileged, penetrated. Accordingly, unquestioned, unquestioning, the alert step was let down, opened wide was the hall-door, and lightly tripped she up the steps; but the first look into the hall told her that company was in the house already—yes—a breakfast—all were in the breakfast-room, except Lady Castlefort, not yet come down—above, the footman believed, in her boudoir. To the boudoir Cecilia went, but Lady Castlefort was not there, and Cecilia was surprised to hear the sound of music in the drawing-room, Lady Castlefort's voice singing. While she waited in the next room for the song to be finished, Cecilia turned over the books on the table, richly gilt and beautifully bound, except one in a brown paper parcel, which seemed unsuited to the table, yet excited more attention that all the others, because it was directed "*Private—for Lady Katherine Hawksby—to be returned before two o'clock.*" What could it be? thought Lady Cecilia. But her attention was now attracted by the song which Lady Castlefort seemed to be practising; the words were distinctly pronounced, uncommonly distinctly, so as to be plainly heard—

"Had we never loved so kindly,
Had we never loved so blindly,
Never met, or never parted,
We had ne'er been broken-hearted."

As Cecilia listened, she cast her eyes upon a card which lay on the table—"Lord Beltravers," and a new light flashed upon her, a light favourable to her present purpose; for since the object was altered with Lady Castlefort, since it was not Beauclerc any longer, there would be no further ill-will towards Helen. Lady Castlefort was not of the violent vindictive sort, with her there was no long-lasting *dépit amoureux*. She was not that fury, a woman scorned, but that blessed spirit,

a woman believing herself always admired. "Soft, silly, sooth—not one of the hard, wicked, is Louisa," thought Cecilia. And as Lady Castlefort, slowly opening the door, entered, timid, as if she knew some particular person was in the room, Cecilia could not help suspecting that Louisa had intended her song for other ears that those of her dear cousin, and that the superb negligence of her dress was not unstudied; but that well-prepared, well-according, sentimental air, changed instantly on seeing—not the person expected, and with a start, she exclaimed, "Cecilia Clarendon!"

"Louisa Castlefort!" cried Lady Cecilia, answering that involuntary start of confusion with a well-acted start of admiration. "Louisa Castlefort, *si belle, si belle*, so beautifully dressed!"

"Beautifully dressed—nothing extraordinary!" said Lady Castlefort, advancing with a half embarrassed, half *nonchalant* air—"One must make something of a *toilette de matin*, you know, when one has people to breakfast."

"So elegant, so negligent!" continued Lady Cecilia.

"There is the point," said Lady Castlefort. "I cannot bear anything that is studied in costume, for dress is really a matter of so little consequence! I never bestow a thought upon it. Angelique rules my toilette as she pleases."

"Angelique has the taste of an angel fresh from Paris," cried Lady Cecilia.

"And now tell me, Cecilia," pursued Lady Castlefort, quite in good humour, "tell me, my dear, to what do I owe this pleasure? what makes you so *matinale?* It must be something very extraordinary."

"Not at all, only a little matter of curiosity."

Then, from Lady Castlefort, who had hitherto, as if in absence of mind, stood, there was a slight "Won't you sit?" motion.

"No, no, I can't sit, can't stay," said Lady Cecilia.

A look quickly visible, and quickly suppressed, showed Lady Castlefort's sense of relief; then came immediately greater pressing to sit down, "Pray do not be in such a hurry."

"But I am keeping you; have you breakfasted?"

"Taken coffee in my own room," said Lady Castlefort.

"But you have people to breakfast; must not you go down?"

"No, no, I shall not go down, for this is Katrine's affair, as I will explain to you."

Lady Cecilia was quite content, without any explanation; and sitting down, she drew her chair close to Lady Castlefort, and said, "Now, my dear, my little matter of curiosity."

"Stay, my dear, first I must tell you about Katrine —now confidentially—very."

Lady Cecilia ought to have been aware that when once her dear cousin Louisa's little heart opened, and she became confidential, very, it was always of her own domestic grievances she began to talk, and that, once the sluice opened, out poured from the deep reservoir the long-collected minute drops of months and years.

"You have no idea what a life I lead with Katrine —now she is grown blue."

"Is she?" said Lady Cecilia, quite indifferent.

"Deep blue! shocking: and this is a blue breakfast, and all the people at it are blue bores, and a blue bore is, as Horace Churchill says, one of the most mischievous creatures breathing; and he tells me the only way of hindering them from doing mischief is by *ringing* them; but first you must get rings. Now, in this case, for Katrine not a ring to be had for love or money. So there is no hope for me."

"No hope for me," thought Lady Cecilia, throwing herself back in her chair, submissive, but not resigned.

"If it had but pleased Heaven," continued Lady Castlefort, "in its mercy, to have sent Katrine a husband of any kind, what a blessing it would have been! If she could but have been married to anybody —now anybody——"

"Anybody is infinitely obliged to you," said Cecilia, "but since that is out of the question, let us say no more about it—no use."

"No use! that is the very thing of which I complain; the very thing which must ever—ever make me miserable."

"Well, well, my dear," cried Lady Cecilia, no longer capable of patience; "do not be miserable any more just now; never mind Katrine just now."

"Never mind her! Easy for you to say, Cecilia, who do not live with Katrine Hawksby, and do not know what it is to have such a plague of a sister, watching one—watching every turn, every look one gives—worse than a jealous husband. Can I say more?"

"No," cried Cecilia; "therefore say no more about it. I understand it all perfectly, and I pity you from the bottom of my heart, so now, my dear Louisa——"

"I tell you, my dear Cecilia," pursued Lady Castlefort, continuing her own thoughts, "I tell you Katrine is envious of me. Envy has been her fault from a child. Envy of poor me! Envy, in the first place, of whatever good looks it pleased Providence to give me." A glance at the glass.—"And now Katrine envies me for being Lady Castlefort; Heaven knows! now, Cecilia, and you know, she need not envy me so when she looks at Lord Castlefort; that is what she sometimes says herself, which you know is very wrong of her to say to me—unnecessary too,

when she knows I had no more hand in my marriage——"

"Than heart!" Cecilia could not forbear saying.

"Than heart!" readily responded Lady Castlefort; "never was a truer word said. Never was there a more complete sacrifice than my mother made of me; you know, Cecilia, a poor, young, innocent, helpless sacrifice, if ever there was one upon earth."

"To a coronet," said Lady Cecilia.

"Absolutely dragged to the altar," continued Lady Castlefort.

"In Mechlin lace, that was some comfort," said Cecilia, laughing, and she laughed on in hope of cutting short this sad chapter of sacrifices. But Lady Castlefort did not understand raillery upon this too tender point. "I don't know what you mean by Mechlin lace," cried she pettishly. "Is this your friendship for me, Cecilia?"

Cecilia, justly in fear of losing the reward of all her large lay-out of flattery, fell to protesting the tenderest sympathy. "But only now it was all over, why make her heart bleed about what could not be helped?"

"Cannot be helped! Oh! there is the very thing I must ever, ever mourn."

The embroidered cambric handkerchief was taken out of the bag; no tears, indeed, came, but there were sobs, and Cecilia not knowing how far it might go, apprehending that her ladyship meditated hysterics, seized a smelling-bottle, threw out the stopper, and presented it close under the nostrils. The good "*Sels poignans d'Angleterre*," of which Felicie always acknowledged the unrivalled potency, did their business effectually. Back went the head, with an exclamation of "That's enough! Oh, oh! too much! too much, Cecilia!"

"Are you better, my dear?" inquired Cecilia;

"but indeed you must not give way to low spirits; indeed, you must not: so now to change the conversation, Louisa——"

"Not so fast, Lady Cecilia; not yet;" and now Louisa went on with a medical maundering. "As to low spirits, my dear Cecilia, I must say I agree with Sir Sib Pennyfeather, who tells me it is not mere common low spirits, but really all mind, too much mind; mind preying upon my nerves. Oh! I knew it myself. At first he thought it was rather constitutional; poor dear Sir Sib! he is very clever, Sir Sib; and I convinced him he was wrong; and so we agreed that it was all upon my mind—all; all——"

At that instant a green parrot, who had been half asleep in the corner, awoke on Lady Castlefort's pronouncing, in an elevated tone, "All, all!" and conceiving himself in some way called upon, answered, "Poll! Poll! bit o' sugar, Poll!" No small difficulty had Lady Cecilia at that moment in keeping her risible muscles in order; but she did, for Helen's sake, and she was rewarded, for after Lady Castlefort had, all unconscious of ridicule, fed Poll from her amber *bonbonnière*, and sighed out once more "Mind! too much mind!" she turned to Cecilia, and said, "But, my dear, you wanted something; you had something to ask me."

At once, and as fast as she could speak, Lady Cecilia poured out her business about Helen Stanley. She told of the ill-bred manner in which Helen had been received last night; inquired why the words *promessi sposi* and *belle fiancée* were so oddly repeated, as if they had been watchwords, and asked what was meant by all those strange whisperings in the *sanctum sanctorum*.

"Katrine's set," observed Lady Castlefort coolly. "Just like them; just like her!"

"I should not care about it in the least," said Lady Cecilia, "if it were only Katrine's ill-nature, or their ill-breeding. Ill-breeding always recoils on the ill-bred, and does nobody else any harm. But I should be glad to be quite clear that there is nothing more at the bottom."

Lady Castlefort made no reply, but took up a bunch of seals, and looked at each of them one after another. Lady Cecilia, more afraid now than she had yet been that there was something at the bottom, still bravely went on, "What is it? If you know, tell me at once."

"Nay, ask Katrine," said Lady Castlefort.

"No, I ask you, I would rather ask you, for you are good-natured, Louisa—so tell me."

"But I dare say it is only slander," said the good-natured Louisa.

"Slander!" repeated Lady Cecilia, "slander did you say?"

"Yes; what is there to surprise you so much in that word? did you never hear of such a thing? I am sure I hear too much of it; Katrine lives and breathes and fattens upon it; as Churchill says, she eats slander, drinks slander, sleeps upon slander."

"But tell me, what of Helen? that is all I want to hear," cried Lady Cecilia: "Slander! of Helen Stanley! what is it that Katrine says about poor Helen? what spite, what vengeance, can she have against her, tell me, tell me."

"If you would ask one question at a time, I might be able to answer you," said Lady Castlefort. "Do not hurry me so; you fidget my nerves. First as to the spite, you know yourself that Katrine, from the beginning, never could endure Helen Stanley; for my part, I always rather liked her than otherwise, and shall defend her to the last."

"Defend her!"

"But Katrine was always jealous of her, and lately worse than ever, for getting into her place, as she says, with you; that made her hate her all the more."

"Let her hate on, that will never make me love Helen the less."

"So I told her; and besides, Miss Stanley is going to be married."

"To be sure;—well?"

"And Katrine naturally hates everybody that is going to be married. If you were to see the state she is in always reading the announcements of Marriages in High Life! Churchill, I do believe, had Miss Stanley's intended match put into every paper continually, on purpose for the pleasure of plaguing Katrine; and if you could have seen her long face, when she saw it announced in the *Court Gazette*—good authority, you know—really it was pitiable."

"I don't care, I don't care about that—Oh, pray go on to the facts about Helen."

"Well, but the fact is as I tell you; you wanted to know what sufficient cause for vengeance, and am not I telling you? If you would not get into such a state of excitement!—as Sir Sib says, excitement should be avoided. La! my dear," continued Lady Castlefort, looking up at her with unfeigned astonishment, "what agitation! why, if it were a matter that concerned yourself——"

"It concerns my friend, and that is the same thing."

"So one says; but—you look really such a colour."

"No matter what colour I look," cried Cecilia; "go on."

"Do you never read the papers?" said Lady Castlefort.

"Sometimes," said Lady Cecilia; "but I have not looked at a paper these three days; was there anything particular? tell me."

"My dear! tell you! as if I could remember by heart all the scandalous paragraphs I read." She looked round the room, and not seeing the papers, said, "I do not know what has become of those papers; but you can find them when you go home."

She mentioned the names of two papers, noted for being personal, scandalous, and scurrilous.

"Are those the papers you mean?" cried Lady Cecilia; "the general never lets them into the house."

"That is a pity—that's hard upon you, for then you never are, as you see, *au courant du jour*, and all your friends might be abused to death without your knowing it, if some kind person did not tell you."

"Do tell me, then, the substance; I don't want the words."

"But the words are all. Somehow it is nothing without the words."

In her now excited state of communicativeness, Lady Castlefort rose and looked all about the room for the papers, saying, "They were here, they were there, all yesterday; Katrine had them showing them to Lady Masham in the morning, and to all her blue set afterwards — Lord knows what she has done with them. So tiresome looking for things! how I hate it."

She rang the bell and inquired from the footman if he knew what had become of the papers. Of course he did not know, could not imagine—servants never know, nor can imagine what have become of newspapers—but he would inquire. While he went to inquire, Lady Castlefort sank down again into her *bergère*, and again fell into admiration of Cecilia's state of impatience.

"How curious you are! Now I am never really curious about anything that does not come home to myself; I have so little interest about other people."

This was said in all the simplicity of selfishness, not from candour, but from mere absence of shame, and utter ignorance of what others think—what others feel, which always characterises, and often betrays the selfish, even where the head is best capable of supplying the deficiencies of the heart. But Louisa Castlefort had no head to hide her want of heart; while Cecilia, who had both head and heart, looked down upon her cousin with surprise, pity, and contempt, quick succeeding each other, in a sort of parenthesis of feeling, as she moved her eyes for a moment from the door on which they had been fixed, and to which they recurred, while she stood waiting for the appearance of those newspapers. The footman entered with them. "In Mr Landrum's room they were, my lady."

Lady Cecilia did not hear a word that was said, nor did she see that the servant laid a note on the table. It was well that Louisa had that note to read, and to answer, while Cecilia looked at the paragraphs in these papers; else her start must have been seen, her exclamation must have been heard: it must have been marked, that the whole character of her emotion changed from generous sympathy with her friend, to agony of fear for herself. The instant she cast her eyes on that much-read paper, she saw the name of Colonel D'Aubigny; all the rest swam before her eyes. Lady Castlefort, without looking up from her writing, asked —What day of the month? Cecilia could not answer, but recalled to herself by the sound of the voice, she now tried to read—she scarcely read the words, but some way took the sense into her mind at a glance.

Chapter xxxviij.

THE first of these paragraphs caught the eye by its title in capital letters.

"LA BELLE FIANCÉE.

"Though quite unknown in the London world, this young lady cannot fail to excite some curiosity among our fashionables as the successful rival of one whom the greatest painter of the age has pronounced to be *the fairest of the fair*—the Lady B. F * * * * *. This new *Helen* is, we understand, of a respectable family, niece to a late dean, distinguished for piety much and *virtù* more. It was reported that the niece was a great heiress, but after *the proposal* had been made, it was discovered that *Virtù* had made away with every shilling of her fortune. This made no difference in the eyes of her inamorato, who is as rich as he is generous, and who saw with the eyes of a youth 'Of Age to-morrow.' His guardian, a wary general, demurred—but *nursery tactics* prevailed. The young lady, though she had never *been out*, bore the victory from him of many campaigns. The day for the marriage was fixed as announced by us——But we are concerned to state that a *postponement* of this marriage for *mysterious reasons* has taken place. Delicacy forbids us to say more at present."

Delicacy, however, did not prevent their saying in the next paper, in a paragraph headed, "MYSTERY SOLVED," "We understand that in the course of a few days will appear the 'Memoirs of the late Colonel D——y; or, Reminiscences of a Roué, well known in the Fashionable World.' This little volume bids fair to engross the attention of the higher circles, as it

contains, besides innumerable curious, personal, and secret anecdotes, the original love-letters of a certain *belle fiancée*, now residing with a noble family in Grosvenor Square."

Lady Cecilia saw at once the whole dreadful danger —her own letters to Colonel D'Aubigny they must be! How could they have got them? They would be seen by her husband—published to the whole world —if the general found out they were hers, he would cast her off for ever. If they were believed to be Helen's—Helen was undone, sacrificed to her folly, her cowardice. "Oh! if I had but told Clarendon, he would have stopped this dreadful, dreadful publication." And what falsehoods it might contain, she did not even dare to think. All was remorse, terror, confusion—fixed to the spot like one stupefied, she stood. Lady Castlefort did not see it—she had been completely engrossed with what she had been writing, she was now looking for her most sentimental seal, and not till she had pressed that seal down and examined the impression, did she look up or notice Cecilia. Then struck indeed with a sense of something unusual—"My dear," said she, "you have no idea how odd you look—so strange, Cecilia—quite *ébahie!*" Giving two pulls to the bell as she spoke, and her eyes on the door, impatient for the servant, she added— "After all, Cecilia, Helen Stanley is no relation even —only a friend. Take this note—" to the footman who answered the bell; and the moment he left the room, continuing, in the same tone, to Lady Cecilia, she said—"You will have to give her up at last—that's all; so you had better make your mind up to it."

When Lady Cecilia tried to speak, she felt her tongue cleave to the roof of her mouth; and when she did articulate, it was in a sort of hoarse sound. "Is the book published?" She held the paper before

Lady Castlefort's eyes, and pointed to the name she could not utter.

"D'Aubigny's book—is it published, do you mean?" said Lady Castlefort. "Absolutely published, I cannot say, but it is all in print, I know. I do not understand about publishing. There's something about presentation copies: I know Katrine was wild to have one before anybody else, so she is to have the first copy, I know, and, I believe, is to have it this very morning for the people at this breakfast: it is to be the *bonne bouche* of the business."

"What has Katrine to do with it?—Oh, tell me, quick!"

"Dear me, Cecilia, what a fuss you are in!—you make me quite nervous to look at you. You had better go down to the breakfast-room, and you will hear all about it from the fountain-head."

"Has Katrine the book or not?" cried Lady Cecilia.

"Bless me! I will inquire, my dear, if you will not look so dreadful." She rang and coolly asked—"Did that man, that bookseller, Stone, send any parcel or book this morning, do you know, for Lady Katrine?"

"Yes, my lady; Landrum had a parcel for Lady Katrine—it is on the table, I believe."

"Very well." The man left the room.

Lady Cecilia darted on the brown paper parcel she had seen directed to Lady Katrine, and seized it before the amazed Louisa could prevent her. "Stop, stop!" cried she, springing forward, "stop, Cecilia; Katrine will never forgive me!"

But Lady Cecilia, seizing a penknife, cut the first knot. "Oh, Cecilia, I am undone if Katrine comes in! Make haste, make haste! I can only let you have a peep or two. We must do it up again as well as ever," continued Lady Castlefort, while Lady

Cecilia, fast as possible, went on cut, cut, cutting the packthread to bits, and she tore off the brown paper cover, then one of silver paper, that protected the silk binding.

Lady Castlefort took up the outer cover and read, "To be returned before two o'clock."—"What can that mean? Then it is only lent; not her own. Katrine will not understand this—will be outrageously disappointed. I'm sure I don't care. But here is a note from Stone, however, which may explain it." She opened and read—"Stone's respects—existing circumstances make it necessary her ladyship's copy should be returned. Will be called for at two o'clock."

"Cecilia, Cecilia, make haste! But Katrine does not know yet—Still she may come up." Lady Castlefort rang and inquired—

"Have they done breakfast?"

"Breakfast is over, my lady," said the servant who answered the bell, "but Landrum thinks the gentlemen and ladies will not be up immediately, on account of one of the ladies being *performing* a poem."

"Very well, very good," added her ladyship, as the man left the room. "Then, Cecilia, you will have time enough, for when once they begin *performing*, as Sylvester calls it, there is no end of it."

"O heavens!" cried Cecilia, as she turned over the pages, "O heavens! what is here? Such absolute falsehood! Shocking, shocking!" she exclaimed, as she looked on, terrified at what she saw: "Absolutely false—a forgery."

"Whereabouts are you?" said Lady Castlefort, approaching to read along with her.

"Oh, do not read it," cried Cecilia, and she hastily closed the book.

"What signifies shutting the book, my dear," said

Louisa, "as if you could shut people's eyes? I know what it is; I have read it."

"Read it!"

"Read it! I really can read, though it seems to astonish you."

"But it is not published?"

"One can read in manuscript."

"And did you see the manuscript?"

"I had a glimpse. Yes—I know more than Katrine thinks I know."

"Oh tell me, Louisa; tell me all," cried Cecilia.

"I will, but you must never tell that I told it to you."

"Speak, speak," cried Cecilia.

"It is a long story," said Lady Castlefort.

"Make it short then. Oh tell me quick, Louisa."

"There is a literary *dessous des cartes*," said Lady Castlefort, a little vain of knowing a literary *dessous des cartes;* "Churchill being at the head of everything of that sort, you know, the bookseller brought him the manuscript which Sir Thomas D'Aubigny had offered him, and wanted to know whether it would do or not. Mr Churchill's answer was, that it would never do without more pepper and salt, meaning gossip and scandal, and all that. But you are reading on, Cecilia, not listening to me."

"I am listening, indeed."

"Then never tell how I came to know everything. Katrine's maid has a lover, who is, as she phrases it, one of the gentlemen connected with the press. Now my Angelique, who cannot endure Katrine's maid, tells me that this man is only a *wonder-maker*, a half-crown paragraph writer. So, through Angelique, and indeed from another person—" she stopped; and then went on—"through Angelique it was told to me."

"All what?" cried Cecilia; "go on, go on to the facts."

"I will, if you will not hurry me so. The letters were not in Miss Stanley's handwriting."

"No! I am sure of that," said Cecilia.

"Copies were all that they pretended to be; so they may be forgeries after all, you see."

"But how did Katrine or Mr Churchill come by the copies?"

"I have a notion, but of this I am not quite sure—I have a notion, from something I was told by—in short, I suspect that Carlos, Lady Davenant's page, somehow got at them, and gave them, or had them given to the man who was to publish the book. Lady Katrine and Churchill laid their heads together; here, in this very *sanctum sanctorum*. They thought I knew nothing, but I knew everything. I do not believe Horace had anything to do with it, except saying that the love-letters would be just the thing for the public if they were bad enough. I remember, too, that it was he who added the second title, 'Reminiscences of a Roué,' and said something about alliteration's artful aid. And now," concluded Lady Castlefort, "it is coming to the grand catastrophe, as Katrine calls it. She has already told the story, and to-day she was to give all her set what she calls ocular demonstration. Cecilia, now, quick, finish; they will be here this instant. Give me the book; let me do it up this minute."

"No, no; let me put it up," cried Lady Cecilia, keeping possession of the book and the brown paper. "I am a famous hand at doing up a parcel, as famous as any Bond Street shopman: your hands are not made for such work."

Anybody but Lady Castlefort would have discerned that Lady Cecilia had some further design, and she was herself afraid it would be perceived; but taking courage from seeing what a fool she had to deal with,

Lady Cecilia went on more boldly: "Louisa, I must have more pack-thread; this is all cut to bits."

"I will ring and ask for some."

"No, no; do not ring for the footman; he might observe that we had opened the parcel. Cannot you get a string without ringing? Look in that basket."

"None there, I know," said Lady Castlefort, without stirring.

"In your own room then; Angelique has some."

"How do you know?"

"I know! never mind how. Go, and she will give you pack-thread. I must have it before Katrine comes up. So go, Louisa, go."

"Go," in the imperative mood, operated, and she went; she did not know why.

That instant Lady Cecilia drew the book out of the half-folded paper, and quick, quick, tore out page after page—every page of those letters that concerned herself or Helen, and into the fire thrust them, and as they blazed held them down bravely—had the boldness to wait till all was black: all the while she trembled, but stood it, and they were burnt, and the book in its brown-paper cover was left on the table, and she downstairs, before Lady Castlefort's dressing-room door opened, and she crossed the hall without meeting a soul except the man in waiting there. The breakfast-room was at the back of the house, looking into the gardens, and her carriage at the front-door had never been seen by Lady Katrine, or any of her blue set. She cleared out of the house into her carriage—and off—— "To the Park," said she.—She was off but just in time. The whole tribe came out of the breakfast-room before she had turned the corner of the street. She threw herself back in the carriage and took breath, congratulating herself upon this hair-

breadth 'scape. For this hour, this minute, she had escaped!—she was reprieved!

And now what was next to be done? This was but a momentary reprieve. Another copy would be had—no, not till to-morrow though. The sound of the words that had been read from the bookseller's note by Lady Castlefort, though scarcely noticed at the time, recurred to her now; and there was hope something might to-day be done to prevent the publication. It might still be kept for ever from her husband's and from Beauclerc's knowledge. One stratagem had succeeded—others might.

She took a drive round the Park to compose the excessive flurry of her spirits. Letting down all the glasses, she had the fresh air blowing upon her, and ere she was half round, she was able to think of what yet remained to do. Money! Oh! any money she could command she would give to prevent this publication. She was not known to the bookseller—no matter. Money is money from whatever hand. She would trust the matter to no one but herself, and she would go immediately—not a moment to be lost.—"To Stone's, the bookseller's."

Arrived. "Do not give my name; only say, a lady wants to speak to Mr Stone."

The people at Mr Stone's did not know the livery or the carriage, but such a carriage and such a lady commanded the deference of the shopman. "Please to walk in, madam," and by the time she had walked in, the man changed madam into your ladyship—"Mr Stone will be with your ladyship in a moment—only in the warehouse. If your ladyship will please to walk up into the back drawing-room—there's a fire." The maid followed to blow it; and while the bellows wheezed and the fire did not burn, Lady Cecilia looked out of the window in eager expectation of seeing Mr

Stone returning from the warehouse with all due celerity. No Mr Stone, however, appeared; but there was a good fire in the middle of the courtyard, as she observed to the maid who was plying the wheezing bellows; and who answered that they had had a great fire there this hour past "burning of papers." And at that moment a man came out with his arms full of a huge pile—sheets of a book, Lady Cecilia saw—it was thrown on the fire. Then came out and stood before the fire—could she be mistaken?—impossible—it was like a dream—the general!

Cecilia's first thought was to run away before she should be seen; but the next moment that thought was abandoned, for the time to execute it was now past. The messenger sent across the yard had announced that a lady in the back drawing-room wanted Mr Stone. Eyes had looked up—the general had seen and recognised her, and all she could now do was, to recognise him in return, which she did as eagerly and gracefully as possible. The general came up to her directly, not a little astonished that she, whom he fancied at home in her bed, incapacitated by a headache that had prevented her from speaking to him, should be here, so far out of her usual haunts, and, as it seemed, out of her element—"What can bring you here, my dear Cecilia?"

"The same purpose which, if I rightly spell, brought you here, my dear general," and her eye intelligently glanced at the burning papers in the yard.

"Do you know then, Cecilia, what those papers are? How did you know?"

Lady Cecilia told her history, keeping as strictly to facts as the nature of the case admitted. Her headache, of course, she had found much better for the sleep she had taken. She had set off, she told him, as soon as she was able, for Lady Castlefort's, to inquire into the

meaning of the strange whispers of the preceding night. Then she told of the scandalous paragraphs she had seen; how she had looked over the book; and how successfully she had torn out and destroyed the whole chapter; and then how, hoping to be able to prevent the publication, she had driven directly to Mr Stone's.

Her husband, with confiding, admiring eyes, looked at her and listened to her, and thought all she said so natural, so kind, that he could not but love her the more for her zeal of friendship, though he blamed her for interfering, in defiance of his caution. "Had you consulted me, or listened to me, my dear Cecilia, this morning, I could have saved you all this trouble; I should have told you that I would settle with Stone, and stop the publication, as I have done."

"But that copy which had been sent to Lady Katrine, surely I did some good there by burning those pages; for if once it had got among her set, it would have spread like wildfire, you know, Clarendon."

He acknowledged this, and said, smiling—"Be satisfied with yourself, my love; I acknowledge that you made there a capital *coup de main.*"

Just then in came Mr Stone with an account in his hand, which the general stepped forward to receive, and, after one glance at the amount, he took up a pen, wrote, and signed his name to a cheque on his banker. Mr Stone received it, bowed obsequiously, and assured the general that every copy of the offensive chapter had been withdrawn from the book and burnt—"that copy excepted which you have yourself, general, and that which was sent to Lady Katrine Hawksby, which we expect *in* every minute, and it shall be sent to Grosvenor Square immediately. I will bring it myself, to prevent all danger."

The general, who knew there was no danger there, smiled at Cecilia, and told the bookseller that he need

take no further trouble about Lady Katrine's copy; the man bowed, and looking again at the amount of the cheque, retired well satisfied.

"You come home with me, my dear Clarendon, do not you?" said Lady Cecilia.

They drove off. On their way, the general said—"It is always difficult to decide whether to contradict or to let such publications take their course: but in the present case, to stop the scandal instantly and completely was the only thing to be done. There are cases of honour, when women are concerned, where law is too slow: it must not be remedy, it must be prevention. If the finger of scorn dares to point, it must be—cut off." After a pause of grave thought, he added—"Upon the manner in which Helen now acts will depend her happiness—her character—her whole future life."

Lady Cecilia summoned all her power to prevent her from betraying herself: the danger was great, for she could not command her fears so completely as to hide the look of alarm with which she listened to the general; but in his eyes her agitation appeared no more than was natural for her to feel about her friend.

"My love," continued he, "if Helen is worthy of your affection, she will show it now. Her only resource is in perfect truth: tell her so, Cecilia—impress it upon her mind. Would to Heaven I had been able to convince her of this at first! Speak to her strongly, Cecilia; as you love her, impress upon her that my esteem, Beauclerc's love, the happiness of her life, depend upon her truth!" As he repeated these words, the carriage stopped at their own door.

Chapter xxxix.

WE left Helen in the back drawing-room, the door bolted, and beginning to read her dreaded task. The paragraphs in the newspapers, we have seen, were sufficiently painful, but when she came to the book itself—to the letters—she was in consternation, greater even than what she had felt in the general's presence under the immediate urgency of his eye and voice. Her conviction was that in each of these letters, there were some passages, some expressions, which certainly were Cecilia's, but mixed with others, which as certainly were not hers. The internal evidence appeared to her irresistibly strong: and even in those passages which she knew to be Cecilia's writing, it too plainly appeared that, however playfully, however delicately expressed, there was more of real attachment for Colonel D'Aubigny than Cecilia had ever allowed Helen to believe; and she felt that Cecilia must shrink from General Clarendon's seeing these as her letters, after she had herself assured him that he was her first love. The falsehood was here so indubitable, so proved, that Helen herself trembled at the thought of Cecilia's acknowledging the plain facts to her husband. The time for it was past. Now that they were in print, published perhaps, how must he feel! If even candid confession were made to him, and made for the best motives, it would to him appear only forced by necessity—forced, as he would say to himself, because her friend would not submit to be sacrificed.

Such were Helen's thoughts on reading the two or three first letters, but, as she went on, her alarm increased to horror. She saw things which she felt certain Cecilia could never have written; yet truth and falsehood were so mixed up in every paragraph,

circumstances which she herself had witnessed so misrepresented, that it was all to her inextricable confusion. The passages which were to be marked could not now depend upon her opinion, her belief; they must rest upon Cecilia's integrity—and could she depend upon it? The impatience which she had felt for Lady Cecilia's return now faded away, and merged in the more painful thought that, when she did come, the suspense would not end—the doubts would never be satisfied.

She lay down upon the sofa and tried to rest, kept herself perfectly still, and resolved to think no more; and, as far as the power of the mind over itself can stay the ever-rising thoughts, she controlled hers, and waited with a sort of forced, desperate composure for the event. Suddenly she heard that knock, that ring, which she knew announced Lady Cecilia's return. But not Cecilia alone; she heard the general also coming upstairs, but Cecilia first, who did not stop for more than an instant at the drawing-room door:—she looked in, as Helen guessed, and seeing that no one was there, ran very quickly up the next flight of stairs. Next came the general:—on hearing his step, Helen's anxiety became so intense, that she could not, at the moment he came near, catch the sound or distinguish which way he went. Strained beyond its power, the faculty of hearing seemed suddenly to fail—all was confusion, an indistinct buzz of sounds. The next moment, however, recovering, she plainly heard his step in the front drawing-room, and she knew that he twice walked up and down the whole length of the room, as if in deep thought. Each time as he approached the folding doors she was breathless. At last he stopped, his hand was on the lock—she recollected that the door was bolted, and as he turned the handle she, in a powerless voice, called to tell him, but not hearing her, he tried again, and as the door

shook she again tried to speak, but could not. Still she heard, though she could not articulate. She heard him say, "Miss Stanley, are you there? Can I see you?"

But the words—the voice—seemed to come from afar—sounded dull and strange. She tried to rise from her seat—found a difficulty—made an effort—stood up—she summoned resolution—struggled—hurried across the room—drew back the bolt—threw open the door—and that was all she could do. In that effort strength and consciousness failed—she fell forward and fainted at the general's feet. He raised her up, and laid her on the sofa in the inner room. He rang for her maid, and went upstairs to prevent Cecilia's being alarmed. He took the matter coolly: he had seen many fainting young ladies, he did not like them—his own Cecilia excepted—in his mind always excepted from every unfavourable suspicion regarding the sex. Helen, on the contrary, was at present subject to them all, and, under the cloud of distrust, he saw in a bad light everything that occurred; the same appearances which, in his wife, he would have attributed to the sensibility of true feeling, he interpreted in Helen as the consciousness of falsehood, the proof of cowardly duplicity. He went back at once to his original prejudice against her, when, as he first thought, she had been forced upon him in preference to his own sister. He had been afterwards convinced that she had been perfectly free from all double dealing; yet now he slid back again, as people of his character often do, to their first opinion. "I thought so at first, and I find, as I usually do, that my first thought was right."

What had been but an adverse feeling was now considered as a prescient judgment. And he did not go upstairs the quicker for these thoughts, but calmly and coolly, when he reached Lady Cecilia's dressing-room,

knocked at the door, and, with all the precautions necessary to prevent her from being alarmed, told her what had happened. "You had better not go down, my dear Cecilia, I beg you will not. Miss Stanley has her own maid, all the assistance that can be wanted. My dear, it is not fit for you. I desire you will not go down."

But Lady Cecilia would not listen, could not be detained; she escaped from her husband, and ran down to Helen. Excessively alarmed she was, and well she might be, knowing herself to be the cause, and not certain in any way how it might end. She found Helen a little recovered, but still pale as white marble; and when Lady Cecilia took her hand, it was still quite cold. She came to herself but very slowly. For some minutes she did not recover perfect consciousness, or clear recollection. She saw figures of persons moving about her, she felt them as if too near, and wished them away; wanted air, but could not say what she wished. She would have moved, but her limbs would not obey her will. At last, when she had with effort half raised her head, it sunk back again before she could distinguish all the persons in the room. The shock of cold water on her forehead revived her; then coming clearly to power of perception, she saw Cecilia bending over her. But still she could not speak, and yet she understood distinctly, saw the affectionate anxiety, too, in her little maid Rose's countenance; she felt that she loved Rose, and that she could not endure Felicie, who had now come in, and was making exclamations, and advising various remedies, all of which, when offered, Helen declined. It was not merely that Felicie's talking, and tone of voice, and superabundant action, were too much for her; but that Helen had at this moment a sort of intuitive perception of insincerity, and of exaggeration. In that dreamy state, hovering between life and death,

in which people are on coming out of a swoon, it seems as if there was need for a firm hold of reality; the senses and the understanding join in the struggle, and become most acute in their perception of what is natural or what is unnatural, true or false, in the expressions and feelings of the bystanders. Lady Cecilia understood her look, and dismissed Felicie, with all her smelling-bottles. Rose, though not ordered away, judiciously retired as soon as she saw that her services were of no further use, and that there was something upon her young lady's mind, for which hartshorn and sal volatile could be of no avail.

Cecilia would have kissed her forehead, but Helen made a slight withdrawing motion, and turned away her face: the next instant, however, she looked up, and taking Cecilia's hand, pressed it kindly, and said, "You are more to be pitied than I am; sit down, sit down beside me, my poor Cecilia; how you tremble! and yet you do not know what is coming upon you."

"Yes, yes, I do—I do," cried Lady Cecilia, and she eagerly told Helen all that had passed, ending with the assurance that the publication had been completely stopped by her dear Clarendon; that the whole chapter containing the letters had been destroyed, that not a single copy had got abroad. "The only one in existence is this," said she, taking it up as she spoke, and she made a movement as if going to tear out the leaves; but Helen checked her hand, "That must not be, the general desired——"

And almost breathless, yet distinctly, she repeated what the general had said, that he might be called upon to prove which parts were forged, and which true, and that she had promised to mark the passages. "So now, Cecilia, here is a pencil, and mark what is and what is not yours."

Lady Cecilia instantly took the pencil, and in great agitation obeyed. "Oh, my dear Helen, some of these

the general could not think yours. Very wicked these people have been!—so the general said; he was sure, he knew, all could not be yours."

"Finish! my dear Cecilia," interrupted Helen; "finish what you have to do, and in this last trial, give me this one proof of your sincerity. Be careful in what you are now doing, mark truly—oh, Cecilia! every word you recollect—as your conscience tells you. Will you, Cecilia? this is all I ask, as I am to answer for it —will you?"

Most fervently she protested she would. She had no difficulty in recollecting, in distinguishing her own; and at first she marked truly, and was glad to separate what was at worst only foolish girlish nonsense from things which had been interpolated to make out the romance; things which never could have come from her mind.

There is some comfort in having our own faults overshadowed, outdone by the greater faults of others. And here it was flagrant wickedness in the editor, and only weakness and imprudence in the writer of the real letters. Lady Cecilia continually solaced her conscience by pointing out to Helen, as she went on, the folly, literally the folly, of the deception she had practised on her husband; and her exclamations against herself were so vehement that Helen would not add to her pain by a single reproach, since she had decided that the time was past for urging her confession to the general. She now only said, "Look to the future, Cecilia, the past we cannot recall. This will be a lesson you can never forget."

"Oh, never, never can I forget it. You have saved me, Helen."

Tears and protestations followed these words, and at the moment they were all sincere; and yet, can it be believed? even in this last trial, when it came to this

last proof, Lady Cecilia was not perfectly true. She purposely avoided putting her mark of acknowledgment to any of those expressions which most clearly proved her love for Colonel D'Aubigny; for she still said to herself that the time might come, though at present it could not be, when she might make a confession to her husband—in his joy at the birth of a son, she thought she might venture; she still looked forward to doing justice to her friend at some future period, and to make this easier—to make this possible—as she said to herself, she must now leave out certain expressions, which might, if acknowledged, remain for ever fixed in Clarendon's mind, and for which she could never be forgiven.

Helen, when she looked over the pages, observed among the unmarked passages some of those expressions which she had thought were Cecilia's, but she concluded she was mistaken: she could not believe that her friend could at such a moment deceive her, and she was even ashamed of having doubted her sincerity; and her words, look, and manner now gave assurance of perfect unquestioning confidence.

This delicacy in Helen struck Lady Cecilia to the quick. Ever apt to be more touched by her refined feelings than by any strong appeal to her reason or her principles, she was now shocked by the contrast between her own paltering meanness and her friend's confiding generosity. As this thought crossed her mind, she stretched out her hand again for the book, took up the pencil, and was going to mark the truth; but, the impulse past, cowardice prevailed, and cowardice whispered, "Helen is looking at me, Helen sees at this moment what I am doing, and, after having marked them as not mine, how can I now acknowledge them? —it is too late—it is impossible."

"I have done as you desired," continued she,

"Helen, to the best of my ability. I have marked all this, but what can it signify now, my dear, except——"

Helen interrupted her. "Take the book to the general this moment, will you, and tell him that all the passages are marked as he desired; stay, I had better write."

She wrote upon a slip of paper a message to the same effect, having well considered the words by which she might, without further step in deception, save her friend, and take upon herself the whole blame—the whole hazardous responsibility.

When Cecilia gave the marked book to General Clarendon, he said, as he took it, "I am glad she has done this, though it is unnecessary now, as I was going to tell her if she had not fainted; unnecessary, because I have now in my possession the actual copies of the original letters; I found them here on my return. That good little poetess found them for me at the printer's—but she could not discover—I have not yet been able to trace where they came from, or by whom they were copied."

"Oh, let me see them," cried Lady Cecilia.

"Not yet, my love," said he; "you would know nothing more by seeing them; they are in a feigned hand evidently."

"But," interrupted Cecilia, "you cannot want the book now, when you have the letters themselves;" and she attempted to draw it from his hand, for she instantly perceived the danger of the discrepancies between her marks and the letters being detected. She made a stronger effort to withdraw the book, but he held it fast.

"Leave it with me now, my dear; I want it; it will settle my opinion as to Helen's truth."

Slowly, and absolutely sickened with apprehension, Lady Cecilia withdrew. When she returned to Helen,

and found how pale she was and how exhausted she seemed, she entreated her to lie down again and try to rest.

"Yes, I believe I had better rest before I see Granville," said Helen: "where can he have been all day?"

"With some friend of his, I suppose," said Cecilia, and she insisted on Helen's saying no more, and keeping herself perfectly quiet. She farther suggested that she had better not appear at dinner.

"It will be only a family-party, some of the general's relations. Miss Clarendon is to be here, and she is one, you know, trying to the spirits; and she is not likely to be in her most *suave* humour this evening, as she has been under a course of the toothache, and has been all day at the dentist's."

Helen readily consented to remain in her own room, though she had not so great a dread of Miss Clarendon as Lady Cecilia seemed to feel. Lady Cecilia was indeed in the greatest terror lest Miss Clarendon should have heard some of these reports about Helen and Beauclerc, and would in her blunt way ask directly what they meant, and go on with some of her point-blank questions, which Cecilia feared might be found unanswerable. However, as Miss Clarendon had only just come to town from Wales, and come only about her teeth, she hoped that no reports could have reached her; and Cecilia trusted much to her own address and presence of mind in moments of danger, in turning the conversation the way it should go.

But things were now come to a point where none of the little skilful interruptions or lucky hits, by which she had so frequently profited, could avail her farther than to delay what must be. Passion and character pursue their course unalterably, unimpeded by small external circumstances; interrupted they may be in their

progress, but as the stream opposed bears against the obstacle, sweeps it away, or foams and passes by.

Before Lady Cecilia's toilette was finished her husband was in her dressing-room; came in without knocking—a circumstance so unusual with him, that Mademoiselle Felicie's eyes opened to their utmost orbit, and, without waiting for word or look, she vanished, leaving the bracelet half clasped on her lady's arm.

"Cecilia!" said the general.

He spoke in so stern a tone that she trembled from head to foot; her last falsehood about the letters—all her falsehoods, all her concealments, were, she thought, discovered; unable to support herself, she sank into his arms. He seated her, and went on in a cool, inexorable tone, "Cecilia, I am determined not to sanction by any token of my public approbation this marriage, which I no longer in my private conscience desire or approve; I will not be the person to give Miss Stanley to my ward."

Lady Cecilia almost screamed: her selfish fears forgotten, she felt only terror for her friend. She exclaimed, "Clarendon, will you break off the marriage? Oh! Helen, what will become of her! Clarendon, what can you mean?"

"I mean that I have compared the passages that Helen marked in the book with those copies of the letters which were given to the bookseller before the interpolations were made—the letters as Miss Stanley wrote them. The passages in the letters and the passages marked in the book do not agree."

"Oh, but she might have forgotten, it might be accident," cried Cecilia, overwhelmed with confusion.

"No, Cecilia," pursued the general, in a tone which made her heart die within her—"no, Cecilia, it is not accident, it is design. I perceive that every strong expression, every word, in short, which could show

her attachment to that man, has been purposely marked as not her own, and the letters themselves prove that they were her own. The truth is not in her."

In an agitation, which prevented all power of thought, Cecilia exclaimed, "She mistook—she mistook; I could not, I am sure, recollect; she asked me if I remembered any."

"She consulted you, then?"

"She asked my advice—told me that——"

"I particularly requested her," interrupted the general, "not to ask your advice; I desired her not to speak to you on the subject—not to consult you. Deceit—double-dealing in everything she does, I find."

"No, no, it is my fault; everything I say and do is wrong," cried Lady Cecilia. "I recollect now—it was just after her fainting, when I brought the book, and when she took it to mark she really was not able. It was not that she consulted me, but I forced my counsel upon her. I looked over the letters, and said what I thought—if anybody is wrong, it is I, Clarendon. Oh, do not visit my sins upon Helen so cruelly!—do not make me the cause of her ruin, innocent creature! I assure you, if you do this, I never could forgive myself."

The general looked at her in silence: she did not dare to meet his eyes, desperately anxious as she was to judge by his countenance what was passing within. He clasped for her that bracelet which her trembling hands were in vain attempting to close.

"Poor thing, how its heart beats!" said her husband, pressing her to him as he sat down beside her. Cecilia thought she might venture to speak.—"You know, my dear Clarendon, I never oppose—interfere with—any determination of yours when once it is fixed——"

"This is fixed," interrupted the general.

"But after all you have done for her this very day,

for which I am sure she—I am sure I thank you from my soul, would you now undo it all?"

"She is saved from public shame," said the general; "from private contempt I cannot save her: who can save those who have not truth? But my determination *is* fixed; it is useless to waste words on the subject. Esther is come; I must go to her. And now, Cecilia, I conjure you, when you see Beauclerc—I have not seen him all day—I do not know where he has been—I conjure you—I command you not to interfere between him and Helen."

"But you would not have me give her up! I should be the basest of human beings."

"I do not know what you mean, Cecilia; you have done for her all that an honourable friend could do."

"I am not an honourable friend," was Cecilia's bitter consciousness, as she pressed her hand upon her heart, which throbbed violently with contending fears.

"You have done all that an honourable friend could do; more must not be done," continued the general. "And now recollect, Cecilia, that you are my wife as well as Miss Stanley's friend;" and, as he said these words, he left the room.

Chapter xl.

THAT knowing French minister, Louvois, whose power is said to have been maintained by his surpassing skill in collecting and spreading secret and swift intelligence, had in his pay various classes of unsuspected agents, dancing-masters, fencing-masters, language-masters, milliners, hairdressers and barbers—dentists, he would have added, had he lived to our times; and not all Paris could have furnished him with

a person better suited to his purpose than the most fashionable London dentist of the day, St Leger Swift. Never did Frenchman exceed him in volubility of utterance, or in gesture significant, supplying all that words might fear or fail to tell; never was he surpassed by prattling barber or privileged hunchback in ancient or modern story, Arabian or Persian; but he was not a malicious, only a coxcomb scandal-monger, triumphing in his *sçavoir dire*. St Leger Swift was known to everybody—knew everybody in London that was to be or was not to be known, every creature dead or alive that ever had been, or was about to be celebrated, fashionable, or rich, or clever, or notorious, *roué* or murderer, about to be married or about to be hanged—for that last class of persons enjoys in our days a strange kind of heroic celebrity, of which Voltaire might well have been jealous. St Leger was, of course, hand and glove with all the royal family; every illustrious personage—every most illustrious personage—had in turn sat in his chair; he had had all their heads, in their turns, in his hands, and he had capital anecdotes and sayings of each, with which he charmed away the sense of pain in loyal subjects. But with scandal for the fair was he specially provided. Never did man or woman skim the surface tittle-tattle of society, or dive better, breathless, into family mysteries; none, with more careless air, could at the same time talk and listen—extract your news and give you his *on dit*, or tell the secret which you first reveal. There was in him and about him such an air of reckless, cordial coxcombry, it warmed the coldest, threw the most cautious off their guard, brought out family secrets as if he had been one of your family—your secret purpose as though he had been a secular father confessor; as safe everything told to St Leger Swift, he would swear to you, as if known only to yourself: he would swear, and you would

believe, unless peculiarly constituted, as was the lady who, this morning, took her seat in his chair—

Miss Clarendon. She was accompanied by her aunt, Mrs Pennant.

"Ha! old lady and young lady, fresh from the country. Both, I see, persons of family—of condition," said St Leger to himself. On that point his practised eye could not mistake, even at first glance; and accordingly it was really doing himself a pleasure, and these ladies, as he conceived it, a pleasure, a service, and an honour, to put them, immediately on their arrival in town, *au courant du jour*. Whether to pull or not to pull a tooth that had offended, was the professional question before him.

Miss Clarendon threw back her head, and opened her mouth.

"Fine teeth, fine! Nothing to complain of here surely," said St Leger. "As fine a show of ivory as ever I beheld. 'Pon my reputation, I know many a fine lady who would give—all but her eyes for such a set."

"I must have this tooth out," said Miss Clarendon, pointing to the offender.

"I see; certainly, ma'am, as you say."

"I hope, sir, you don't think it necessary," said her tender-hearted aunt: "if it could be any way avoided——"

"By all means, madam, as you say. We must do nothing without consideration."

"I have considered, my dear aunt," said Miss Clarendon. "I have not slept these three nights."

"But you do not consider that you caught cold getting up one night for me; and it may be only an accidental cold, my dear Esther. I should be so sorry if you were to lose a tooth. Don't be in a hurry; once gone, you cannot get it back again."

"Never was a truer, wiser word spoken, madam," said St Leger, swiftly whisking himself round, and as if looking for some essential implement. "May be a mere twinge, accidental cold, rheumatism; or may be ——My dear madam" (to the aunt), "I will trouble you; let me pass. I beg pardon—one word with you," and with his back to the patient in the chair, while he rummaged among ivory-handled instruments on the table, he went on in a low voice to the aunt—"Is she nervous? is she nervous, eh, eh, eh?"

Mrs Pennant looked, but did not hear, for she was a little deaf.

"Yes, yes, yes; I see how it is. A word to the wise," replied he, with a nod of intelligence. "Every lady's nervous nowadays, more or less. Where the deuce did I put this thing? Yes, yes—nerves;—all the same to me; know how to manage. Make it a principle—professional, to begin always by talking away nerves. You shall see, you shall see, my dearest madam; you shall soon see—you shall hear, you shall hear how I'll talk this young lady—your niece—out of her nerves fairly. Beg pardon, Miss——, one instant. I am searching for—where have I put it?"

"I beg your pardon, sir: I am a little deaf," said Mrs Pennant.

"Deaf—hey? Ha! a little deaf. So everybody is nowadays; even the most illustrious personages, more or less. Death and deafness common to all—*mors omnibus*. I have it. Now, my dear young lady, let us have another look and touch at these beautiful teeth. Your head will do very—vastly well, my dear ma'am—Miss —— um, um, um!" hoping the name would be supplied. But that Miss Clarendon did not tell.

So raising his voice to the aunt as he went on looking, or seeming to look, at the niece's tooth, he

continued rapidly—"From Wales you are, ma'am? a beautiful country Wales, ma'am. Very near being born there myself, like, ha, ha, ha! that Prince of Wales—first Prince—Caernarvon Castle—you know the historical anecdote. Never saw finer teeth, upon my reputation. Are you ladies, may I ask, for I've friends in both divisions—are you North or South Wales, eh, eh?"

"South, sir. Llansillen.

"Ay, South. The most picturesque certainly. Llansillen, Llansillen; know it; know everybody ten miles round. Respectable people—all—very; most respectable people come up from Wales continually. Some of our best blood from Wales, as a great personage observed lately to me—Thick, thick! not thicker blood than the Welsh. His late Majesty, *à-propos*, was pleased to say to me once——"

"But," interrupted Miss Clarendon, "what do you say to my tooth?"

"Sound as a roach, my dear ma'am; I will insure it for a thousand pounds."

"But that, the tooth you touch, is not the tooth I mean: pray look at this, sir?"

"Excuse me, my dear madam, a little in my light," said he to the aunt. "May I beg the favour of your name?"

"Pennant! ah! ah! ah!" with his hands in uplifted admiration—"I thought so—Pennant. I said so to myself, for I know so many Pennants—great family resemblance—Great naturalist of that name—any relation? Oh yes—No—I thought so from the first. Yes—and can assure you, to my private certain knowledge, that man stood high on the pinnacle of favour with a certain royal personage—for, often sitting in this very chair—

"Keep your mouth open—a little longer—little

wider, my good Miss Pennant. Here's a little something for me to do, nothing of any consequence—only touch and go—nothing to be taken away, no, no, must not lose one of these fine teeth. That most illustrious personage said one day to me, sitting in this very chair —'Swift,' said he, 'St Leger Swift,' familiarly, condescendingly, colloquially—'St Leger Swift, my good fellow,' said he—

"But positively, my dear Miss —— um, um, if you have not patience—you must sit still—pardon me, professionally I must be peremptory. Impossible I could hurt—can't conceive—did not touch—only making a perquisition—inquisition—say what you please, but you are nervous, ma'am; I am only taking a general survey.

"*A-propos*—general survey—General—a friend of mine, General Clarendon is just come to town. My ears must have played me false, but I thought my man said something like Clarendon when he showed you up."

No answer from Miss Clarendon, who held her mouth open wide, as desired, resolved not to satisfy his curiosity, but to let him blunder on.

"Be that as it may, General Clarendon's come to town—fine teeth he has too—and a fine kettle of fish—not very elegant, but expressive still—he and his ward have made, of that marriage announced. Fine young man, though, that Beauclerc—finest young man, almost, I ever saw!"

But here Mr St Leger Swift, starting suddenly, withdrawing his hand from Miss Clarendon's mouth, exclaimed—

"My finger, ma'am! but never mind, never mind, all in the day's work. Casualty—contingencies—no consequence. But as I was saying, Mr Granville Beauclerc——"

Then poured out, on the encouragement of one look of curiosity from Mrs Pennant, all the *on dits* of Lady Katrine Hawksby, and all her chorus, and all the best authorities; and St Leger Swift was ready to pledge himself to the truth of every word. He positively knew that the marriage was off, and thought, as everybody did, that the young gentleman was well off too; for besides the young lady's great fortune turning out not a *sous*—and here he supplied the half-told tale by a drawn-up ugly face and shrugging gesture.

"Shocking! shocking! all came to an *éclat*—*esclandre;* a scene quite, last night, I am told, at my friend Lady Castlefort's. Sad—sad—so young a lady! But to give you a general idea, love-letters to come out in the Memoirs of that fashionable roué—friend of mine too—fine fellow as ever breathed—only a little—you understand; Colonel D'Aubigny—Poor D'Aubigny, heigho!—only if the book comes out—Miss Stanley——"

Mrs Pennant looked at her niece in benevolent anxiety; Miss Clarendon was firmly silent; but St Leger, catching from the expression of both ladies' countenances that they were interested in the contrary direction to what he had anticipated, turned to the right about, and observed—

"This may be all scandal, one of the innumerable daily false reports that are always flying about town; scandal all, I have no doubt—Your head a little to the right, if you please—And the publication will be stopped, of course, and the young lady's friends—you are interested for her, I see; so am I—always am for the young and fair, that's my foible; and indeed, confidentially I can inform you—If you could keep your head still, my dear madam."

But Miss Clarendon could bear it no longer; starting from under his hand, she exclaimed, "No more, thank

you—no more at present, sir: we can call another day —no more;" and added as she hastily left the room, "Better bear the toothache," and ran downstairs. Mrs Pennant slipped into the dentist's hand, as he pulled the bell, a double fee; for though she did not quite think he deserved it much, yet she felt it necessary to make amends for her niece's way of running off, which might not be thought quite civil.

"Thank you, ma'am—thank ye, ma'am—not the least occasion—don't say a word about it—Young lady's nervous, said so from the first. Nerves! nerves! all—open the door there—Nerves all," were the last words, at the top of the stairs, St Leger Swift was heard to say.

And the first words of kind Mrs Pennant, as soon as she was in the carriage and had drawn up the glass, were, "Do you know, Esther, my dear, I am quite sorry for this poor Miss Stanley. Though I don't know her, yet, as you described her to me, she was such a pretty, young, interesting creature! I am quite sorry."

"I don't believe a word of it," said Miss Clarendon.

"But even to have such things said must be so distressing to her and to her lover, your friend Mr Beauclerc—so very distressing!"

"I hope they are not such fools as to be distressed about such stuff. All this insufferable talking man's invention, I dare say."

"Why do people tell such things?" said Mrs Pennant. "But, my dear Esther, even supposing it to be all false, it is shocking to have such things spoken of. I pity the poor young lady and her lover. Do you not think, my dear, we shall be able to inquire into the truth of the matter from your brother this evening? He must know, he ought to know about it: whether

the report be true or false, he should hear of it. He can best judge what should be done, if anything should be done, my dear."

Miss Clarendon quite agreed with all this; indeed she almost always agreed with this aunt of hers, who, perhaps from the peculiar gentleness of her manner, joined to a simplicity and sincerity of character she could never doubt, had an ascendency over her, which no one, at first view, could have imagined.

They had many country commissions to execute this morning, which naturally took up a good deal of Aunt Pennant's attention. But between each return from shop to carriage, in the intervals between one commission off her hands and another on her mind, she returned regularly to "that poor Miss Stanley, and those love-letters!" and she sighed. Dear kind-hearted old lady! she had always a heart, as well as a hand, open as day to melting charity—charity in the most enlarged sense of the word: charity in judging as well as charity in giving. She was all indulgence for human nature, for youth and love especially.

"We must take care, my dear Esther," said she, "to be at General Clarendon's early, as you will like to have some little time with him to yourself before any one else arrives—shall you not, my dear?"

"Certainly," replied Miss Clarendon; "I shall learn the truth from my brother in five minutes, if Lady Cecilia does not come between us."

"Nay, my dear Esther, I cannot think so ill of Lady Cecilia; I cannot believe——"

"No, my dear aunt, I know you cannot think ill of anybody. Stay till you know Lady Cecilia Clarendon as I do. If there is anything wrong in this business, you will find that some falsehood of hers is at the bottom of it."

"Oh, my dear, do not say so before you know;

perhaps, as you thought at first, we shall find that it is all only a mistake of that giddy dentist's; for your brother's sake try to think as well as you can of his wife; she is a charming agreeable creature, I am sure."

"You've only seen her once, my dear aunt," said Miss Clarendon. "For my brother's sake I would give up half her agreeableness for one ounce—for one scruple—of truth."

"Well, well, take it with some grains of allowance, my dear niece; and, at any rate, do not suffer yourself to be so prejudiced as to conceive she can be in fault in this business."

"We shall see to-day," said Miss Clarendon; "I will not be prejudiced; but I remember hearing at Florence that this Colonel D'Aubigny had been an admirer of Lady Cecilia's. I will get at the truth."

With this determination, and in pursuance of the resolve to be early, they were at General Clarendon's full a quarter of an hour before the arrival of any other company; but Lady Cecilia entered so immediately after the general, that Miss Clarendon had no time to speak with her brother alone. Determined, however, as she was, to get at the truth, without preface, or even smoothing her way to her object, she rushed into the middle of things at once. "Have you heard any reports about Miss Stanley, brother?"

"Yes."

"And you, Lady Cecilia?"

"Yes."

"What have you heard?"

Lady Cecilia was silent, looked at the general, and left it to him to speak as much or as little as he pleased. She trusted to his laconic mode of answering, which, without departing from truth, defied curiosity. Her trust in him upon the present occasion was, however,

a little disturbed by her knowledge of his being at this moment particularly displeased with Helen. But, had she known the depths as well as she knew the surface of his character, her confidence in his caution would have been increased, instead of being diminished by this circumstance: Helen was lost in his esteem, but she was still under his protection; her secrets were not only sacred, but, as far as truth and honour could admit, he would still serve and save her. Impenetrable, therefore, was his look, and brief was his statement to his sister. A rascally bookseller had been about to publish a book, in which were some letters which paragraphs in certain papers had led the public to believe were Miss Stanley's; the publication had been stopped, the offensive chapter suppressed, and the whole impression destroyed.

"But, brother," pursued Miss Clarendon, "were the letters Miss Stanley's, or not? You know I do not ask from idle curiosity, but from regard for Miss Stanley;" and she turned her inquiring eyes full upon Lady Cecilia.

"I believe, my dear Esther," said Lady Cecilia, "I believe we had better say no more; you had better inquire no further."

"That must be a bad case which can bear no inquiry," said Miss Clarendon; "which cannot admit any further question, even from one most disposed to think well of the person concerned—a desperately bad case."

"Bad! no, Esther. It would be cruel of you so to conclude: and falsely it would be—might be; indeed, Esther! my dear Esther!——"

Her husband's eyes were upon Lady Cecilia, and she did not dare to justify Helen decidedly; her imploring look and tone, and her confusion, touched the kind aunt, but did not stop the impenetrable niece.

"Falsely, do you say? Do you say, Lady Cecilia, that it would be to conclude falsely? Perhaps not falsely though, upon the data given to me. The data may be false."

"Data! I do not know what you mean exactly, Esther," said Lady Cecilia, in utter confusion.

"I mean exactly what I say," pursued Miss Clarendon; "that if I reason wrong, and come to a false conclusion, or what you call a cruel conclusion, it is not my fault, but the fault of those who do not plainly tell me the facts."

She looked from Lady Cecilia to her brother, and from her brother to Lady Cecilia. On her brother no effect was produced: calm, unalterable, looked he; as though his face had been turned to stone. Lady Cecilia struggled in vain to be composed. "I wish I could tell you, Esther," said she; "but facts cannot always—all facts—even the most innocent—that is, even with the best intentions—cannot always be all told, even in the defence of one's best friend."

"If this be the best defence you can make for your best friend, I am glad you will never have to defend me, and I am sorry for Helen Stanley."

"Oh, my dear Esther!" said her aunt, with a remonstrating look; for, though she had not distinctly heard all that was said, she saw that things were going wrong, and that Esther was making them worse. "Indeed, Esther, my dear, we had better let this matter rest."

"Let this matter rest!" repeated Miss Clarendon; "that is not what you would say, my dear aunt, if you were to hear any evil report of me. If any suspicion fell like a blast on my character, you would never say 'let it rest.'"

Fire lighted in her brother's eyes, and the stone face was all animated, and he looked sudden sympathy, and

he cried, "You are right, sister, in principle, but wrong in—fact."

"Set me right where only I am wrong then," cried she.

He turned to stone again, and her aunt in a low voice said, "Not now."

"Now or never," said the sturdy champion; "it is for Miss Stanley's character. You are interested for her, are not you, aunt?"

"Certainly, I am indeed; but we do not know all the circumstances—we cannot——"

"But we must. You do not know, brother, how public these reports are. Mr St Leger Swift, the dentist, has been chattering to us all morning about them. So, to go to the bottom of the business at once, will you, Lady Cecilia, answer me one straightforward question?"

Straightforward question! what is coming? thought Lady Cecilia: her face flushed, and taking up a hand-skreen, she turned away, as if from the scorching fire; but it was not a scorching fire, as everybody, or at least as Miss Clarendon, could see. The face turned away from Miss Clarendon was full in view of Aunt Pennant, who was on her other side; and she, seeing the distressed state of the countenance, pitied, and gently laying her hand upon Lady Cecilia's arm, said, in her soft low voice, "This must be a very painful subject to you, Lady Cecilia. I am sorry for you."

"Thank you," said Lady Cecilia, pressing her hand with quick gratitude for her sympathy. "It is indeed to me a painful subject, for Helen has been my friend from childhood, and I have so much reason for loving her!"

Many contending emotions struggled in Cecilia's countenance, and she could say no more: but what she had said, what she had looked, had been quite enough to interest tenderly in her favour that kind

heart to which it was addressed; and Cecilia's feeling was true at the instant; she forgot all but Helen; the skreen was laid down; tears stood in her eyes—those beautiful eyes! "If I could but tell you the whole—oh if I could! without destroying——"

Miss Clarendon at this moment placed herself close opposite to Cecilia, and, speaking so low that neither her brother nor her aunt could hear her, said, "Without destroying yourself, or your friend—which?"

Lady Cecilia could not speak.

"You need not—I am answered," said Miss Clarendon; and returning to her place, she remained silent for some minutes.

The general rang, and inquired if Mr Beauclerc had come in.

"No."

The general made no observation, and then began some indifferent conversation with Mrs Pennant, in which Lady Cecilia forced herself to join; she dreaded even Miss Clarendon's silence—that grim repose—and well she might.

"D'Aubigny's Memoirs, I think, was the title of the book, aunt, that the dentist talked of? That is the book you burnt, is not it, brother?—a chapter in that book?"

"Yes," said the general.

And again Miss Clarendon was silent; for though she well recollected what she had heard at Florence, and however strong were her suspicions, she might well pause; for she loved her brother before everything but truth and justice—she loved her brother too much to disturb his confidence. "I have no proof," thought she; "I might destroy his happiness by another word, and I may be wrong."

"But shall not we see Miss Stanley?" said Mrs Pennant.

Lady Cecilia was forced to explain that Helen was not very well, would not appear till after dinner—nothing very much the matter—a little faintish.

"Fainted," said the general.

"Yes, quite worn-out—she was at Lady Castlefort's last night—such a crowd!" She went on to describe its city horrors.

"But where is Mr Beauclerc all this time?" said Miss Clarendon: "has he fainted too? or is he faintish?"

"Not likely," said Lady Cecilia; "faint heart never won fair lady. He is not of the faintish sort."

At this moment a thundering knock at the door announced the rest of the company, and never was company more welcome. But Beauclerc did not appear. Before dinner was served, however, a note came from him to the general. Lady Cecilia stretched out her hand for it, and read—

"My dear Friends,—I am obliged to dine out of town. I shall not return to-night, but you will see me at breakfast-time to-morrow.

"Yours ever,

"Granville Beauclerc."

Cockburn now entered with a beautiful bouquet of hot-house flowers, which, he said, Mr Beauclerc's man had brought with the note, and which were, he said, for Miss Stanley. Lady Cecilia's countenance grew radiant with joy, and she exclaimed, "Give them to me—I must have the pleasure of taking them to her myself."

And she flew off with them. Aunt Pennant smiled on her as she passed, and, turning to her niece as Lady Cecilia left the room, said, "What a bright creature! so warm, so affectionate!"

Miss Clarendon was indeed struck with the indisputably natural sincere satisfaction and affection in Cecilia's countenance; and, herself of such a different nature, could not comprehend the possibility of such contradiction in any character: she could not imagine the existence of such variable, transitory feelings—she could not believe any human being capable of sacrificing her friend to save herself, while she still so loved her victim, could still feel such generous sympathy for her. She determined at least to suspend her judgment; she granted Lady Cecilia a reprieve from her terrific questions and her as terrific looks. Cecilia recovered her presence of mind, and dinner went off delightfully, to her at least, with the sense of escape in recovered self-possession, and "spirits light, to every joy in tune."

From the good-breeding of the company there was no danger that the topic she dreaded should be touched upon. Whatever reports might have gone forth, whatever any one present might have heard, nothing would assuredly be said of her friend Miss Stanley, to her, or before her, unless she or the general introduced the subject; and she was still more secure of his discretion than of her own. The conversation kept safe on London-dinner generalities and frivolities. Yet often things that were undesignedly said touched upon the tabooed matter; and those who knew when, where, and how it touched, looked at or from one another, and almost equally dangerous was either way of looking. Such perfect neutrality of expression is not given to all men in these emergencies as to General Clarendon.

The dessert over, out of the dinner-room and in the drawing-room, the ladies alone together, things were not so pleasant to Lady Cecilia. Curiosity peeped out more and more in great concern about Miss Stanley's health; and when ladies trifled over their coffee, and saw through all things with their half-shut eyes, they

asked, and Lady Cecilia answered, and parried, and explained, and her conscience winced, and her countenance braved, and Miss Clarendon listened with that dreadfully good memory, that positive point-blank recollection, which permits not the slightest variation of statement. Her doubts and her suspicions returned, but she was silent; and sternly silent she remained the rest of the evening.

Chapter xli.

IF "trifles light as air are to the jealous confirmations strong as proofs of Holy Writ," and that they are no one since the time of Othello could ever doubt, it may be some consolation to observe, on the credit side of human nature, that, to those who are not cursed with a jealous infirmity, trifles light as air are often confirmations strong of the constancy of affection. Well did Lady Cecilia know this when she was so eager to be the bearer of the flowers which were sent by Beauclerc. She foresaw and enjoyed the instant effect, the quick smile, and blush of delight with which that bouquet was received by Helen.

"Oh, thank you! How kind of him!" and "All's well," was her immediate conclusion. When she saw his note, she never even took notice that he did not particularly mention her. The flowers from him were enough; she knew his sincerity so well, trusted to it so completely, that she was quite sure, if he had been angry with her, he would not have sent these tokens of his love—slight tokens, though they were all-sufficient for her. Her fears had taken but one direction, and in that direction they were all dispelled. He would be at breakfast to-morrow, when she should know where

he had been, and what had detained him from her the whole of this day. She told Cecilia that she was now quite well, but that she would not attempt to go downstairs. And Cecilia left her happy, so far at least; and when she was alone with her flowers, she doubly enjoyed them, inhaling the fragrance of each which she knew he particularly liked, and thanking him in her heart for the careful choice, for she was certain that they were not accidentally put together. Some of them were associated with little circumstances known only to themselves, awakening recollections of bright, happy moments, and selected, she was sure, with reference to a recent conversation they had had on the language of flowers.

Whether Helen fancied half this, or whether it was all true, it had the effect of soothing and pleasing her anxious, agitated mind; and she was the more ready to indulge in that pleasant reverie, from all that she had previously suffered herself, and all that she feared Beauclerc had yet to endure. She knew too well how much these reports would affect him—and hear them he must. She considered what trials he had already borne, and might still have to bear, for her sake, whatever course she might now pursue. Though soon, very soon, the whole would be told to him, yet still, though she might stand clear in his eyes as to the main points, he must, and would blame her weakness in first consenting to this deception—he who was above deceit. She had not absolutely *told*, but she had *admitted* a falsehood; she had *acted* a falsehood. This she could not extenuate. Her motive at first, to save Lady Davenant's life, was good; but then her weakness afterwards, in being persuaded time after time by Cecilia, could not well be excused. She was conscious that she had sunk step by step, dragged down that slippery path by Cecilia, instead of firmly making a

stand, as she ought to have done, and upholding by her own integrity her friend's failing truth. With returning anguish of self-reproach, she went over and over these thoughts; she considered the many unforeseen circumstances that had occurred. So much public shame, so much misery had been brought upon herself and on all she loved, by this one false step! And how much more might still await her, notwithstanding all that best of friends, the general, had done! She recollected how much he had done for her!—thinking of her too, as he must, with lowered esteem, and that was the most painful thought of all. To Beauclerc she could and would soon clear her truth, but to the general—never, perhaps, completely!

Her head was leaning on her hand, as she was sitting deep in these thoughts, when she was startled by an unusual knock at her door. It was Cockburn with a packet, which General Clarendon had ordered him to deliver into Miss Stanley's own hands. The instant she saw the packet she knew that it contained *the book;* and on opening it she found manuscript letters inserted between the marked pages, and there was a note from General Clarendon. She trembled—she foreboded ill.

The note began by informing Miss Stanley how the enclosed manuscript letters came into General Clarendon's hands from a person whom Miss Stanley had obliged, and who had hoped in return to do her some service. The general next begged Miss Stanley to understand that these letters had been put into his possession since his conversation with her at breakfast time; his only design in urging her to mark her share in the printed letters had been to obtain her authority for serving her to the best of his ability; but he had since compared them:—and then came references, without comment, to the discrepancies between the

marked passages, the uniform character of the omissions, followed only by a single note of admiration at each from the general's pen. And at last, in cold polite phrase, came his regret that he had not been able to obtain that confidence which he had trusted he had deserved, and his renunciation of all future interference in her affairs — *or concerns*, had been written, but a broad dash of the pen had erased the superfluous words; and then came the inevitable conclusion, on which Helen's eyes fixed, and remained immovable for some time — that determination which General Clarendon had announced to his wife in the first heat of indignation, but which, Lady Cecilia had hoped, could be evaded, changed, postponed—would not at least be so suddenly declared to Helen; therefore she had given her no hint, had in no way prepared her for the blow—and with the full force of astonishment it came upon her—"General Clarendon cannot have the pleasure he had proposed to himself, of giving Miss Stanley at the altar to his ward. He cannot by any public act of his attest his consent to that marriage, of which, in his private opinion, he no longer approves."

"And he is right. O Cecilia!" was Helen's first thought, when she could think after this shock—not of her marriage, not of herself, not of Beauclerc, but of Cecilia's falsehood—Cecilia's selfish cowardice, she thought, and could not conceive it possible—could not believe it, though it was there. "Incredible—yet proved—there—there—before her eyes—brought home keen to her heart! after all! at such a time—after her most solemn promise, with so little temptation, so utterly false—with every possible motive that a good mind could have to be true—in this last trial—her friend's whole character at stake—ungenerous—base! O Cecilia! how different from what I thought you—

or how changed! And I have helped to bring her to this!—I—I have been the cause.—I will not stay in this house—I will leave her. To save her—to save myself—save my own truth and my own real character—let the rest go as it will—the world think what it may! Farther and farther, lower and lower, I have gone: I will not go lower—I will struggle up again at any risk, at any sacrifice. This is a sacrifice Lady Davenant would approve of: she said that if ever I should be convinced that General Clarendon did not wish me to be his guest—if he should ever cease to esteem me—I should go, that instant—and I will go." But where? To whom could she fly, to whom turn? The Collingwoods were gone; all her uncle's friends passed rapidly through her recollection. Since she had been living with General and Lady Cecilia Clarendon, several had written to invite her; but Helen knew a little more of the world now than formerly, and she felt that there was not one, no, not one of all these, to whom she could now, at her utmost need, turn and say, "I am in distress, receive me! my character is attacked, defend me! my truth is doubted, believe in me!" And, her heart beating with anxiety, she tried to think what was to be done. There was an old Mrs Medlicott, who had been a housekeeper of her uncle's, living at Seven Oaks—she would go there—she should be safe—she should be independent. She knew that she was then in town, and was to go to Seven Oaks the next day; she resolved to send Rose early in the morning to Mrs Medlicott's lodging, which was near Grosvenor Square, to desire her to call at General Clarendon's as she went out of town, at eight o'clock. She could then go with her to Seven Oaks; and, by setting out before Cecilia could be up, she should avoid seeing her again.

There are minds which totally sink, and others that

wonderfully rise, under the urgency of strong motive and of perilous circumstance. It is not always the mind apparently strongest or most daring that stands the test. The firm of principle are those most courageous in time of need. Helen had determined what her course should be, and, once determined, she was calm. She sat down and wrote to General Clarendon.

"Miss Stanley regrets that she cannot explain to General Clarendon the circumstances which have so much displeased him. She assures him that no want of confidence has been, on her part, the cause; but she cannot expect that, without further explanation, he should give her credit for sincerity. She feels that with his view of her conduct, and in his situation, his determination is right—that it is what she has deserved —that it is just towards his ward and due to his own character. She hopes, however, that he will not think it necessary to announce to Mr Beauclerc his determination of withdrawing his approbation and consent to his marriage, when she informs him that it will now never be by her claimed or accepted. She trusts that General Clarendon will permit her to take upon herself the breaking off this union. She encloses a letter to Mr Beauclerc, which she begs may be given to him to-morrow. General Clarendon will find she has dissolved their engagement as decidedly as he could desire, and that her decision will be irrevocable. And since General Clarendon has ceased to esteem her, Miss Stanley cannot longer accept his protection, or encroach upon his hospitality. She trusts that he will not consider it as any want of respect that she has resolved to retire from his family as soon as possible. She is certain of having a safe and respectable home with a former housekeeper of her uncle Dean Stanley's, who will call for her at eight o'clock to-morrow and take

her to Seven Oaks, where she resides. Miss Stanley has named that early hour, that she may not meet Mr Beauclerc before she goes; she wishes also to avoid the struggle and agony of parting with Lady Cecilia. She entreats General Clarendon will prevent Lady Cecilia from attempting to see her in the morning, and permit her to go unobserved out of the house at her appointed hour.

"So now farewell, my dear friend—yes, friend, this last time you must permit me to call you; for such I feel you have ever been, and ever would have been, to me, if my folly would have permitted. Believe me—notwithstanding the deception of which I acknowledge I have been guilty towards you, General Clarendon—I venture to say, *believe me*, I am not ungrateful. At this instant my heart swells with gratitude, while I pray that you may be happy—happy as you deserve to be. But you will read this with disdain, as mere idle words: so be it. Farewell!

"Helen Stanley."

Next she was to write to Beauclerc himself. Her letter was as follows:—

"With my whole heart, dear Granville, I thank you for the generous confidence you have shown towards me, and for the invariable steadiness of your faith and love. For your sake, I rejoice. One good has at least resulted from the trials you have gone through: you must now and hereafter feel sure of your own strength of mind. With me it has been different, for I have not a strong mind. I have been all weakness, and must now be miserable; but wicked I will not be—and wicked I should be if I took advantage of your confiding love. I must disappoint your affection, but your confidence I will not betray. When I put your love to that test which it has so nobly stood, I had

hoped that a time would come when all doubts would be cleared up, and when I could reward your constancy by the devotion of my whole happy life—but that hope is past: I cannot prove my innocence—I will no longer allow you to take it upon my assertion. I cannot indeed, with truth, even assert that I have done no wrong; for though I am not false, I have gone on step by step in deception, and might go on, I know not how far, nor to what dreadful consequences, if I did not now stop—and I do stop. On my own head be the penalty of my fault—upon my own happiness—my own character: I will not involve yours—therefore we part. You have not yet heard all that has been said of me; but you soon will, and you will feel, as I do, that I am not fit to be your wife. Your wife should not be suspected; I have been—I am. All the happiness I can ever have in this world must be henceforth in the thought of having saved from misery—if not secured the happiness of those I love. Leave me this hope—Oh, Granville, do not tell me, do not make me believe that you will never be happy without me! You will—indeed you will. I only pray Heaven that you may find love as true as mine, and strength to abide by the truth! Do not write to me—do not try to persuade me to change my determination: it is irrevocable. Further writing or meeting could be only useless anguish to us both. Give me the sole consolation I can now have, and which you alone can give—let me hear from Cecilia that you and your noble-minded guardian are, after I am gone, as good friends as you were before you knew me. I shall be gone from this house before you are here again; I cannot stay where I can do no good, and might do much evil by remaining even a few hours longer. As it is, comfort your generous heart on my account, with the assurance that I am sustained by the consciousness that

I am now, to the best of my power, doing right. Adieu, Granville! Be happy! you can—you have done no wrong. Be happy, and that will console

"Your affectionate

"HELEN STANLEY."

This, enclosed to General Clarendon, she sent by Cockburn, who delivered it to his master immediately.

Though she could perfectly depend upon her maid Rose's fidelity, Helen did not tell her that she was going away in the morning, to avoid bringing her into any difficulty if she were questioned by Lady Cecilia; and besides, no note of preparation would be heard or seen. She would take with her only sufficient for the day, and would leave Rose to pack up all that belonged to her, after her departure, and to follow her. Thanks to her own late discretion, she had no money difficulties —no debts but such as Rose could settle, and she had now only to write to Cecilia; but she had not yet recovered from the tumult of mind which the writing to the general and to Beauclerc had caused. She lay down upon the sofa, and closing her trembling eyelids, she tried to compose herself sufficiently to think at least of what she was to say. As she passed the table in going to the sofa, she, without perceiving it, threw down some of the flowers; they caught her eye, and she said to herself, "Lie there! lie there! Granville's last gifts! last gifts to me! All over now; lie there and wither! Joys that are passed, wither! All happiness for me, gone! Lie there, and wither, and die!—and so shall I soon, I hope—if only that hope is not wrong."

Some one knocked at the door; she started up, and said, "I cannot see you, Cecilia!"

A voice not Cecilia's, a voice she did not recollect, answered, "It is not Cecilia; let me see you. I come from General Clarendon."

Helen opened the door, and saw—Miss Clarendon. Her voice had sounded so much lower and gentler than usual, that Helen had not guessed it to be hers. She was cloaked, as if prepared to go away; and in the outer room was another lady seated with her back towards them, and with her cloak on also.

"My Aunt Pennant—who will wait for me. As she is a stranger, she would not intrude upon you, Miss Stanley; but will you allow me one minute?"

Helen, surprised, begged Miss Clarendon to come in, moved a chair towards her, and stood breathless with anxiety. Miss Clarendon sat down, and resuming her abruptness of tone, said, "I feel that I have no right to expect that you should have confidence in me, and yet I do. I believe in your sincerity, even from the little I know of you, and I have a notion you believe in mine. Do you?"

"I do."

"I wish it had pleased Heaven," continued Miss Clarendon, "that my brother had married a woman who could speak truth! But you need not be afraid; I will not touch on your secrets. On any matter you have in keeping, my honour as well as yours will command my silence—as will also my brother's happiness, which I have somewhat at heart; not that I think it can be preserved by the means you take. But this is not what I came to say. You mean to go away from this house to-morrow morning."

"Yes," said Helen.

"You are right. I would not stay where I did not esteem, or where I had reason to believe that I was not esteemed. You are quite right to go, and to go directly; but not to your old housekeeper."

"Why not?" said Helen.

"Because, though I dare say she is vastly respectable—an excellent person in her way, I am convinced—

yet my brother says she might not be thought just the sort of person to whom you should go now—not just the thing for you at present; though, at another time, it would be very well and condescending; but now, when you are attacked, you must look to appearances—in short, my brother will not allow you to go to this old lady's boarding-house, or cottage, or whatever it may be, at Seven Oaks; he must be able to say for you where you are gone. You must be with me; you must be at Llansillen. Llansillen is a place that can be named. You must be with me—with General Clarendon's sister. You must—you will, I am sure, my dear Miss Stanley. I never was so happy in having a house of my own as at this moment. You will not refuse to return with my aunt and me to Llansillen, and make our home yours? We will try and make it a happy home to you. Try; you see the sense of it: the world can say nothing when you are known to be with Miss Clarendon; and you will, I hope, feel the comfort of it, out of the stir and din of this London world. I know you like the country, and Llansillen is a beautiful place—romantic too; a fine castle, an excellent library, beautiful conservatory; famous for our conservatories we are in South Wales; and no neighbours—singular blessing! And my Aunt Pennant, you will love her so! Will you try? Come! say that you will."

But Helen could not; she could only press the hand that Miss Clarendon held out to her. There is nothing more touching, more overcoming, than kindness at the moment the heart is sunk in despair. "But did General Clarendon really wish you to ask me?" said Helen, when she could speak. "Did he think so much and so carefully for me to the last? And with such a bad opinion as he must have of me!"

"But there you know he is wrong."

"It is like himself," continued Helen; "consistent

in protecting me to the last. Oh, to lose such a friend!"

"Not lost, only mislaid," said Miss Clarendon. "You will find him again some fair day or other; truth always comes to light. Meanwhile, all is settled. I must run and tell my aunt, and bless the fates and Lady Emily Greville, that Lady Cecilia did not come up in the middle of it. Luckily, she thinks I am gone, and knows nothing of my being with you; for my brother explained all this to me in his study, after we had left the saloon, and he desires me to say that his carriage shall be ready for you at your hour, at eight o'clock. We shall expect you; and now, farewell till to-morrow."

She was gone, and her motto might well be, though in a different acceptation from that of our greatest modern politician—"*Tout faire sans paraître.*"

But before Helen could go to rest, she must write to Lady Cecilia, and her thoughts were in such perplexity, and her feelings in such conflict, that she knew not how to begin. At last she wrote only a few hasty lines of farewell, and referred for her determination, and for all explanations, to her letter to the general. It came to "Farewell, dear Cecilia."

Dear! yes, still dear she was to Helen—she must be as Lady Davenant's daughter—still dear for her own sake was Cecilia, the companion of her childhood, who had shown her such generous affection early, such fondness always, who was so charming, with so many good qualities, so much to win love—loved she must be still. "Farewell, Cecilia; may you be happy!"

But as Helen wrote these words, she thought it impossible, she could scarcely in the present circumstances wish it possible, that Cecilia should be happy. How could she, unless her conscience had become quite callous?

She gave her note to Rose, with orders to deliver

it herself to Lady Cecilia to-night, when she should demand admittance. And soon she came, the very instant Lady Emily Greville went away—before Helen was in bed she heard Cecilia at her door; she left her to parley with Rose—heard her voice in the first instance eager, peremptory for admittance. Then a sudden silence. Helen comprehended that she had opened her note—and in another instant she heard her retreating step. On seeing the first words referring for explanation to Helen's letter to the general, panic-struck, Lady Cecilia hurried to her own room to read the rest privately.

Helen now tried to recollect whether everything had been said, written, done, that ought to be done; and at last went to bed and endeavoured to sleep for a few hours.

Chapter xlij.

HELEN was just dressed, and had given her last orders to her bewildered maid, when she heard a knock at the door, and Mademoiselle Felicie's voice. She could not at this instant endure to hear her heartless exclamatory speeches; she would not admit her. Mademoiselle Felicie gave Rose a note for her young lady—it was from Cecilia.

"DEAREST HELEN,—The general will not allow me to take leave of you this morning, but I shall certainly go to you in the course of to-day. I cannot understand or make you understand anything till I see you. I *will* see you to-day. Your affectionate

"CECILIA."

"I understand it too well!" thought Helen.

The carriage was announced, Helen was ready; she hurried into it, and she was gone! And thus she parted from the friend of her childhood—the friend she had but a few months before met with such joy, such true affection; and her own affection was true to the last.

As Helen drove from the door, she saw the general —yes, it certainly was the general riding off—at this unusual hour!—Was it to avoid her? But she was in too great anguish to dwell upon that or any other circumstance; her only thought now was to subdue her emotion before she was seen by Miss Clarendon and Mrs Pennant. And by the time she arrived, she thought she had quite recovered herself, and was not aware that any traces of tears remained; but to Mrs Pennant's sympathising eyes they were visible, and after the first introductions and salutations were over, that kind lady, as she seated her at the breakfast-table, gently pressing her hand, said, "Poor thing! no wonder—parting with old friends for new is a sad trial: but you know we shall become old friends in time: we will make what haste we can, my dear Miss Stanley, and Esther will help me to make you forget that you have not known us all your life."

"There is very little to be known, no mysteries, that is one comfort," said Miss Clarendon; "so now to breakfast. You are very punctual, Miss Stanley; and that is a virtue which Aunt Pennant likes, and can estimate to a fraction of a minute with that excellent watch of hers."

There was some history belonging to that family watch, which then came out; and then the conversation turned upon little family anecdotes and subject, which were naturally interesting to the aunt and nieces and not exciting to Helen, whose mind, they saw, needed quiet, and freedom from all observation.

From the first awkwardness of her situation, from the sense of intrusion, and the suddenness of change, she was thus as far as possible gradually and almost imperceptibly relieved. By their perfect good-breeding, as well as good-nature, from their making no effort to show her particular attention, she felt received at once into their family as one of themselves; and yet, though there was no effort, she perceived in the most minute circumstances the same sort of consideration which would be shown to an intimate friend. They not only did not expect, but did not wish, that she should make any exertion to appear to be what she could not be; they knew the loneliness of heart she must feel, the weight that must be upon her spirits. They left her, then, quite at liberty to be with them or alone, as she might like, and she was glad to be alone with her own thoughts; they seemed fixed upon Beauclerc. She considered how he would feel, what he would think, when he should receive her letter: she pictured his looks while reading it; considered whether he would write immediately, or attempt, notwithstanding her prohibition, to see her. He would know from General Clarendon, that is, if the general thought proper to tell him, where she was, and that she would remain all this day in town. Though her determination was fixed, whether he wrote or came, to abide by her refusal, and for the unanswerable reasons which she had given, or which she had laid down to herself; yet she could not, and who, loving as she did, could help wishing that Beauclerc should desire to see her again; she hoped that he would make every effort to change her resolution, even though it might cost them both pain. Yet in some pain there is pleasure; or, to be without it, is a worse kind of suffering. Helen was conscious of the inconsistency in her mind, and sighed, and endeavoured to be rea-

sonable. And, to do her justice, there was not the slightest wavering as to the main point. She thought that the general might, perhaps, have some relenting towards her. Hope would come into her mind, though she tried to keep it out; she had nothing to expect, she repeatedly said to herself, except that either Cecilia would send, or the general would call this morning, and Rose must come at all events.

The morning passed on, however, and no one came so soon as Helen had expected. She was sitting in a back room where no knocks at the door could be heard; but she would have been called, surely, if General Clarendon had come. He had come, but he had not asked for her; he had at first inquired only for his sister, but she was not at home, gone to the dentist's. The general then desired to see Mrs Pennant, and when she supposed that she had not heard rightly, and that Miss Stanley must be the person he wished to see, he had answered, "By no means; I particularly wish not to see Miss Stanley. I beg to see Mrs Pennant alone."

It fell to the lot of this gentle-hearted lady to communicate to Helen the dreadful intelligence he brought: a duel had taken place! When Helen had seen the general riding off, he was on his way to Chalk Farm. Just as the carriage was coming round for Miss Stanley, Mr Beauclerc's groom had requested in great haste to see the general; he said he was sure something was going wrong about his master; he had heard the words Chalk Farm. The general was off instantly, but before he reached the spot the duel had been fought. A duel between Beauclerc and Mr Churchill. Beauclerc was safe, but Mr Churchill was dangerously wounded; the medical people present could not answer for his life. At the time the general saw him he was speechless, but when Beauclerc and his second, Lord Beltravers,

had come up to him, he had extended his hand in token of forgiveness to one or the other, but to which he had addressed the only words he had uttered could not be ascertained; the words were, "*You* are not to blame!—escape!—fly!" Both had fled to the Continent. General Clarendon said that he had no time for explanations, he had not been able to get any intelligible account of the cause of the affair. Lord Beltravers had named Miss Stanley, but Beauclerc had stopped him, and had expressed the greatest anxiety that Miss Stanley's name should not be implicated, should not be mentioned. He took the whole blame upon himself—said he would write—there was no time for more.

Mrs Pennant listened with the dread of losing a single word: but however brief his expressions, the general's manner of speaking, notwithstanding the intensity of his emotion, was so distinct that every word was audible, except the name of Lord Beltravers, which was not familiar to her. She asked again the name of Mr Beauclerc's second? "Lord Beltravers," the general repeated with a forcible accent, and loosening his neckcloth with his finger, he added, "Rascal! as I always told Beauclerc that he was, and so he will find him—too late."

Except this exacerbation, the general was calmly reserved in speech, and Mrs Pennant felt that she could not ask him a single question beyond what he had communicated. When he rose to go, which he did the moment he had finished what he had to say, she had, however, courage enough to hope that they should soon hear again, when the general should learn something more of Mr Churchill.

Certainly he would let her know whatever he could learn of Mr Churchill's state.

Her eyes followed him to the door with anxious

eagerness to penetrate farther into what his own opinion of the danger might be. His rigidity of composure made her fear that he had no hope, "otherwise certainly he would have said something."

He opened the door again, and returning said, "Depend upon it you shall hear how he is, my dear Mrs Pennant, before you leave town to-morrow."

"We will not go to-morrow," she replied. "We will stay another day at least. Poor Miss Stanley will be so anxious——"

"I advise you not to stay in town another day, my dear madam. You can do no good by it. If Mr Churchill survive this day, he will linger long, I am assured. Take Helen—take Miss Stanley out of town, as soon as may be. Better go to-morrow, as you had determined."

"But it will be so long, my dear general!—one moment—if we go, it will be so long before we can hear any further news of your ward."

"I will write."

"To Miss Stanley—Oh, thank you."

"To my sister," he looked back to say, and repeated distinctly, "To my sister."

"Very well—thank you, at all events."

Mrs Pennant saw that, in General Clarendon's present disposition towards Miss Stanley, the less she said of him the better, and she confined herself strictly to what she had been commissioned to say, and all she could do was to prevent the added pain of suspense; it was told to Helen in the simplest, shortest manner possible:—but the facts were dreadful. Beauclerc was safe!—safe! but under what circumstances? "And it was for me, I am sure," cried Helen, "I am sure it was for me! I was the cause! I am the cause of that man's death—of Beauclerc's agony."

For some time Helen had not power or thought for

any other idea. The promise that they should hear as soon as they could learn anything more of Mr Churchill's state was all she could rely upon or recur to.

When her maid Rose arrived from General Clarendon's, she said, that when Lady Cecilia heard of the duel she had been taken very ill, but had since recovered sufficiently to drive out with the general. Miss Clarendon assured Helen there was no danger. "It is too deep a misfortune for Lady Cecilia. Her feelings have not depth enough for it, you will see. You need not be afraid for her, Helen."

The circumstances which led to the duel were not clearly known till long afterwards, but may be now related. The moment Beauclerc had parted from Helen when he turned away at the carriage door after the party at Lady Castlefort's, he went in search of one who, as he hoped, could explain the strange whispers he had heard. The person of whom he went in search was his friend, his friend as he deemed him, Lord Beltravers. Churchill had suggested that if anybody knew the bottom of the matter, except that origin of all evil, Lady Katrine herself—it must be Lord Beltravers, with whom Lady Castlefort was, it was said, *fortement éprise*, and as Horace observed, "the secrets of scandal are common property between lovers, much modern love being cemented by hate."

Without taking in the full force of this observation in its particular application to the hatred which Lord Beltravers might feel to Miss Stanley, as the successful rival of his sister Blanche, Beauclerc hastened to act upon his suggestion. His lordship was not at home: his people thought he had been at Lady Castlefort's; did not know where he might be if not there. At some gambling-house Beauclerc at last found him, and Lord Beltravers was sufficiently vexed in the first place at being there found, for he had pretended to his friend

Granville that he no longer played. His embarrassment was increased by the questions which Beauclerc so suddenly put to him; but he had *nonchalante* impudence enough to brave it through, and he depended with good reason on Beauclerc's prepossession in his favour. He protested he knew nothing about it; and he returned Churchill's charge, by throwing the whole blame upon him; said he knew he was in league with Lady Katrine;—mentioned that one morning, some time ago, he had dropped in unexpectedly early at Lady Castlefort's, and had been surprised to find the two sisters, contrary to their wont, together—their heads and Horace Churchill's over some manuscript, which was shuffled away as he entered. This was true, all but the shuffling away; and here it is necessary to form a clear notion, clearer than Lord Beltravers will give, of the different shares of wrong; of wrong knowingly and unknowingly perpetrated by the several scandalmongers concerned in this affair.

Lord Beltravers could be in no doubt as to his own share, for he it was who had furnished the editor of Colonel D'Aubigny's Memoirs with the famous letters. When Carlos, Lady Davenant's runaway page, escaped from Clarendon Park, having changed his name, he got into the service of Sir Thomas D'Aubigny, who was just at this time arranging his brother's papers. Now it had happened that Carlos had been concealed behind the skreen in Lady Davenant's room, the day of her first conversation with Helen about Colonel D'Aubigny, and he had understood enough of it to perceive that there was some mystery about the colonel with either Helen or Lady Cecilia; and chancing one day, soon after he entered Sir Thomas's service, to find his escritoire open, he amused himself with looking over his papers, among which he discovered the packet of Lady Cecilia's letters. Carlos was not perfectly sure

of the handwriting; he thought it was Lady Cecilia's; but when he found the miniature of Miss Stanley along with them, he concluded that the letters must be hers. And having special reasons for feeling vengeance against Helen, and certain at all events of doing mischief, he sent them to General Clarendon: not, however, forgetting his old trade, he copied them first. This was just at the time when Lord Beltravers returned from abroad after his sister's divorce. He by some accident found out who Carlos was, and whence he came, and full of his own views for his sister, he cross-examined him as to everything he knew about Miss Stanley; and partly by bribes, partly by threats of betraying him to Lady Davenant, he contrived to get from him the copied letters. Carlos soon after returned with his master to Portugal, and was never more heard of. Lord Beltravers took these purloined copies of the letters, thus surreptitiously obtained, to the editor, into whose hands Sir Thomas D'Aubigny (who knew nothing of books or book-making) had put his brother's memoirs. This editor, as has been mentioned, had previously consulted Mr Churchill, and in consequence of his pepper and salt hint, Lord Beltravers himself made those interpolations which he hoped would ruin his sister's rival in the eyes of her lover.

Mr Churchill, however, except this hint, and except his vanity in furnishing a good title, and his coxcombry of literary patronage, and his general hope that Helen's name being implicated in such a publication would avenge her rejection of himself, had had nothing to do with the business. This Lord Beltravers well knew, and yet when he found that the slander made no impression upon Beauclerc, and that he was only intent upon discovering the slanderer, he, with dexterous treachery, contrived to turn the tables upon Churchill, and to direct all Beauclerc's suspicion towards him!

He took his friend home with him, and showed him all the newspaper paragraphs—paragraphs which he himself had written! Yes, this man of romantic friendship, this *blasé*, this hero oppressed with his own sensibility, could condescend to write anonymous scandal, to league with newsmongers, and to bribe waiting-women to supply him with information, for Mademoiselle Felicie had, through Lady Katrine's maid, told all, and more than all she knew, of what passed at General Clarendon's; and on this foundation did he construct those paragraphs, which he hoped would blast the character of the woman to whom his dearest friend was engaged. And now he contrived to say all that could convince Beauclerc that Mr Churchill was the author of these very paragraphs. And hot and rash, Beauclerc rushed on to that conclusion. He wrote a challenge to Churchill, and as soon as it was possible in the morning he sent it by Lord Beltravers. Mr Churchill named Sir John Luttrell as his friend: Lord Beltravers would enter into no terms of accommodation; the challenge was accepted, Chalk Farm appointed as the place of meeting, and the time fixed for eight o'clock next morning. And thus, partly by his own warmth of temper, and partly by the falsehood of others, was Beauclerc urged on to the action he detested, to be the thing he hated. Duelling and duellists had, from the time he could think, been his abhorrence, and now he was to end his life, or to take the life of a fellow-creature perhaps, in a duel.

There was a dread interval. And it was during the remainder of this day and night that Beauclerc felt most strongly, compared with all other earthly ties, his attachment, his passionate love for Helen. At every pause, at every close of other thoughts forced upon him, his mind recurred to Helen—what Helen would feel—what Helen would think—what she would suffer

—and in the most and in the least important things his care was for her. He recalled the last look that he had seen at the carriage-door when they parted, recollected that it expressed anxiety, was conscious that he had turned away abruptly—that in the preoccupied state of his mind he had not spoken one word of kindness—and that this might be the last impression of him left on her mind. He knew that her anxiety would increase, when all that day must pass without his return, and it was then he thought of sending her those flowers which would, he knew, reassure her better than any words he could venture to write.

Meanwhile his false friend coldly calculated what were the chances in his sister's favour; and when Churchill fell, and even in the hurry of their immediate departure, Lord Beltravers wrote to Madame de St Cymon, over whom the present state of her affairs gave him command, to order her to set out immediately, and to take Blanche with her to Paris, without asking the consent of that fool and prude, her aunt Lady Grace.

It was well for poor Helen, even in the dreadful uncertainty in which she left London, that she did not know *all* these circumstances. It may be doubted, indeed, whether we should be altogether happier in this life if that worst of evils, as it is often called, suspense, were absolutely annihilated, and if human creatures could clearly see their fate, or even know what is most likely to happen.

Chapter xliij.

ACCORDING to the general's advice, Mrs Pennant did not delay her journey, and Helen left London the next day with her and Miss Clarendon. The last bulletin of Mr Churchill had been

that he was still in great danger, and a few scarce legible lines Helen had received from Cecilia, saying that the general would not allow her to agitate herself by going to take leave of her, that she was glad that Helen was to be out of town till all blew over, and that she was so much distracted by this horrible event, she scarcely knew what she wrote.

As they drove out of town, Miss Clarendon, in hopes of turning Helen's thoughts, went on talking. "Unless," said she, "we could, like Madame de Genlis, 'promote the post-boys into agents of mystery and romance,' we have but little chance, I am afraid, of any adventures on our journey to Llansillen, my dear Miss Stanley."

She inveighed against the stupid safety, convenience, luxury, and expedition of travelling nowadays all over England, even in Wales, "so that one might sleep the whole way from Hyde Park Corner to Llansillen gate," said she, "and have no unconscionably long nap either. No difficulties on the road, nothing to complain of at inns, no enjoying one's dear delight in being angry, no opportunity even of showing one's charming resignation. Dreadfully bad this for the nervous and bilious, for all the real use and benefit of travelling is done away; all too easy for my taste; one might as well be a doll, or a dolt, or a parcel in the coach."

Helen would have been glad to have been considered merely as a parcel in the coach. During the whole journey, she took no notice of anything till they came within a few miles of Llansillen; then, endeavouring to sympathise with her companions, she looked out of the carriage window at the prospect which they admired. But, however charming, Llansillen had not for Helen the chief charm of early, fond, old associations with a happy home. To her it was to be, she doubted not, as happy as kindness could make it, but still it was new; and in that thought, that feeling, there was something

inexpressibly melancholy; and the contrast, at this moment, between her sensations and those of her companions, made the pain the more poignant; they perceived this, and were silent. Helen was grateful for this consideration for her, but she could not bear to be a constraint upon them, therefore she now exerted herself, sat forward—admired and talked when she was scarcely able to speak. By the time they came to Llansillen gate, however, she could say no more; she was obliged to acknowledge that she was not well; and when the carriage at last stopped at the door, there was such a throbbing in her temples, and she was altogether so ill, that it was with the greatest difficulty she could, leaning on Miss Clarendon's arm, mount the high steps to the hall-door. She could scarcely stand when she reached the top, but, making an effort, she went on, crossed the slippery floor of that great hall, and came to the foot of the black oak staircase, of which the steps were so very low that she thought she could easily go up, but found it impossible, and she was carried directly up to Miss Clarendon's own room, no other having yet been prepared. The rosy Welsh maids looked with pity on the pale stranger. They hurried to and fro, talking Welsh to one another very fast; and Helen felt as if she were in a foreign land, and in a dream. The end of the matter was, that she had a low fever which lasted long. It was more dispiriting than dangerous—more tedious than alarming. Her illness continued for many weeks, during which time she was attended most carefully by her two new friends—by Miss Clarendon with the utmost zeal and activity—by Mrs Pennant with the greatest solicitude and tenderness.

Her history for these weeks—indeed for some months afterwards—can be only the diary of an invalid and of a convalescent. Miss Clarendon meanwhile received from her brother, punctually, once a week, bulletins of

Churchill's health; the surgical details, the fears of the formation of internal abscess, reports of continual exfoliations of bone, were judiciously suppressed, and the laconic general reported only "Much the same—not progressing—cannot be pronounced out of danger." These bulletins were duly repeated to Helen, whenever she was able to hear them; and at last she was considered well enough to read various letters, which had arrived for her during her illness; several were from Lady Cecilia, but little in them. The first was full only of expressions of regret and self-reproach; in the last, she said, *she hoped soon to have a right to claim Helen back again.* This underlined passage Helen knew alluded to the promise she had once made, that at the birth of her child all should be told; but words of promise from Cecilia had lost all value—all power to excite even hope, as she said to herself as she read the words, and sighed.

One of her letters mentioned what she would have seen in the first newspaper she had opened, that Lady Blanche Forrester was gone with her sister, the Comtesse de St Cymon, to Paris, to join her brother, Lord Beltravers. But Lady Cecilia observed, that Helen need not be alarmed by this paragraph, which she was sure was inserted on purpose to plague her. Lady Cecilia seemed to take it for granted that her rejection of Beauclerc was only a *ruse d'amour*, and went on with her usual hopes, now vague and more vague every letter—that things would end well some time, somehow or other.

Helen only sighed on reading these letters, and quick as she glanced her eye over them, threw them from her on the bed; and Miss Clarendon said, "Ay! you know her now, I see!"

Helen made no reply: she was careful not to make any comment which could betray how much, or what

sort of reason she had to complain of Lady Cecilia; but Miss Clarendon, confident that she had guessed pretty nearly the truth, was satisfied with her own penetration, and then, after seeming to doubt for a few moments, she put another letter into Helen's hand, and with one of those looks of tender interest which sometimes softened her countenance, she left the room.

The letter was from Beauclerc; it appeared to have been written immediately after he had received Helen's letter, and was as follows:—

"Not write to you, my dearest Helen! Renounce my claim to your hand! submit to be rejected by you, my affianced bride! No, never—never! Doubt! suspicion!—suspicion of you!—you, angel as you are—you, who have devoted, sacrificed yourself to others. No, Helen, my admiration, my love, my trust in you, are greater than they ever were. And do *I* dare to say these words to you? *I*, who am perhaps a murderer! I ought to imitate your generosity, I ought not to offer you a hand stained with blood:—I ought at least to leave you free till I know when I may return from banishment. I have written this at the first instant I have been able to command during my hurried journey, and as you know something of what led to this unhappy business, you shall in my next letter hear the whole; till then, adieu!

"Granville Beauclerc."

The next day, when she thought Helen sufficiently recovered from the agitation of reading Beauclerc's letter, Aunt Pennant produced one letter more, which she had kept for the last, because she hoped it would give pleasure to her patient. Helen sat up in her bed eagerly, and stretched out her hand. The letter was directed by General Clarendon, but that was only the

outer cover, they knew, for he had mentioned in his last despatch to his sister, that the letter enclosed for Miss Stanley was from Lady Davenant. Helen tore off the cover, but the instant she saw the inner direction, she sank back, turned, and hid her face on the pillow.

It was directed—"To Mrs Granville Beauclerc."

Lady Davenant had unfortunately taken it for granted that nothing could have prevented the marriage.

Aunt Pennant blamed herself for not having foreseen and prevented this accident, which she saw distressed poor Helen so much. But Miss Clarendon wondered that she was so shocked, and supposed she would get over it in a few minutes, or else she must be very weak. There was nothing that tended to raise her spirits much in the letter itself, to make amends for the shock the direction had given. It contained but a few lines in Lady Davenant's own handwriting, and a postscript from Lord Davenant. She wrote only to announce their safe arrival at Petersburgh, as she was obliged to send off her letter before she had received any despatches from England; and she concluded with, "I am sure the first will bring me the joyful news of Beauclerc's happiness and yours, my dear child."

Lord Davenant's postscript added, that in truth Lady Davenant much needed such a cordial, for that her health had suffered even more than he had feared it would. He repented that he had allowed her to accompany him to such a rigorous climate.

All that could be said to allay the apprehensions this postscript might excite, was of course said in the best way by Aunt Pennant. But it was plain that Helen did not recover during the whole of this day from the shock she had felt "from that foolish direction," as Miss Clarendon said. She could not be prevailed upon to rise this day, though Miss Clarendon, after feeling her pulse, had declared that she was very well able to

get up. "It was very bad for her to remain in bed." This was true, no doubt. And Miss Clarendon remarked to her aunt that she was surprised to find Miss Stanley so weak. Her aunt replied that it was not surprising that she should be rather weak at present, after such a long illness.

"Weakness of body and mind need not go together," said Miss Clarendon.

"Need not, perhaps," said her aunt, "but they are apt to do so."

"It is to be hoped the weakness of mind will go with the weakness of body, and soon," said Miss Clarendon.

"We must do what we can to strengthen and fatten her, poor thing!" said Mrs Pennant.

"Fatten the body, rather easier than to strengthen the mind. Strength of mind cannot be thrown in, as you would throw in the bark, or the chicken broth."

"Only have patience with her," said Mrs Pennant, "and you will find that she will have strength of mind enough when she gets quite well. Only have patience."

During Helen's illness Miss Clarendon had been patient, but now that she was pronounced convalescent, she became eager to see her quite well. In time of need Miss Clarendon had been not only the most active and zealous, but a most gentle and—doubt it who may—soft-stepping, soft-voiced nurse; but now, when Doctor Tudor had assured them that all fever was gone, and agreed with her that the patient would soon be well, if she would only think so, Miss Clarendon deemed it high time to use something more than her milder influence, to become, if not a rugged, at least a stern nurse, and she brought out some of her rigid lore.

"I intend that you should get up in seasonable time to-day, Helen," said she, as she entered her room.

"Do you?" said Helen, in a languid voice.

"I do," said Miss Clarendon; "and I hope you do

not intend to do as you did yesterday, to lie in bed all day."

Helen turned, sighed, and Mrs Pennant said, "Yesterday is over, my dear Esther—no use in talking of yesterday."

"Only to secure our doing better to-day, ma'am," replied Miss Clarendon with prompt ability.

Helen was all submission, and she got up, and that was well. Miss Clarendon went in quest of arrowroot judiciously; and Aunt Pennant stayed and nourished her patient meanwhile with "the fostering dew of praise;" and let her dress as slowly and move as languidly as she liked, though Miss Clarendon had admonished her "not to *dawdle*."

As soon as she was dressed, Helen went to the window and threw up the sash for the first time to enjoy the fresh air, and to see the prospect, which she was told was beautiful; and she saw that it was beautiful, and, though it was still winter, she felt that the air was balmy; and the sun shone bright, and the grass began to be green, for spring approached. But how different to her from the spring-time of former years! Nature the same, but all within herself how changed! And all which used to please, and to seem to her most cheerful, now came over her spirits with a sense of sadness;—she felt as if all the life of life was gone. Tears filled her eyes, large tears rolled slowly down as she stood fixed, seeming to gaze from that window at she knew not what. Aunt Pennant unperceived stood beside her, and let the tears flow unnoticed. "They will do her good; they are a great relief sometimes."

Miss Clarendon returned, and the tears were dried, but the glaze remained, and Miss Clarendon saw it, and gave a reproachful look at her aunt, as much as to say, "Why did you let her cry?" And her aunt's look in reply was, "I could not help it, my dear."

"Eat your arrowroot," was all that transpired to Helen. And she tried to eat, but could not; and Miss Clarendon was not well pleased, for the arrowroot was good, and she had made it; she felt Miss Stanley's pulse, and said that "It was as good a pulse as could be, only low and a little fluttered."

"Do not flutter it any more, then, Esther, my dear," said Mrs Pennant.

"What am I doing or saying, ma'am, that should flutter anybody that has common sense?"

"Some people don't like to have their pulse felt," said Aunt Pennant.

"Those people have not common sense," replied the niece.

"I believe I have not common sense," said Helen.

"Sense you have enough—resolution is what you want, Helen, I tell you."

"I know," said Helen, "too true——"

"True, but not too true—nothing can be too true."

"True," said Helen, with languid submission.

Helen was not in a condition to chop logic, or ever much inclined to it; now less than ever, and least of all with Miss Clarendon, so able as she was. There is something very provoking sometimes in perfect submission, because it is unanswerable. But the languor, not the submission, afforded some cause for further remark and remonstrance.

"Helen, you are dreadfully languid to-day."

"Sadly," said Helen.

"If you could have eaten more arrowroot before it grew cold, you would have been better."

"But if she could not, my dear Esther," said Aunt Pennant.

"*Could* not, ma'am! As if people could not eat if they pleased."

"But if people have no appetite, my dear, I am afraid eating will not do much good."

"I am afraid, my dear aunt, you will not do Miss Stanley much good," said Miss Clarendon, shaking her head; "you will only spoil her."

"I am quite spoiled, I believe," said Helen; "you must unspoil me, Esther."

"Not so very easy," said Esther; "but I shall try, for I am a sincere friend."

"I am sure of it," said Helen.

Then what more could be said? Nothing at that time—Helen's look was so sincerely grateful, and "gentle as a lamb," as Aunt Pennant observed; and Esther was not a wolf quite—at heart not at all.

Miss Clarendon presently remarked that Miss Stanley really did not seem glad to be better—glad to get well. Helen acknowledged that instead of being glad, she was rather sorry. "If it had pleased Heaven, I should have been glad to die."

"Nonsense about dying, and worse than nonsense," cried Miss Clarendon, "when you see that it did not please Heaven that you should die——"

"I am content to live," said Helen.

"Content! to be sure you are," said Miss Clarendon. "Is this your thankfulness to Providence?"

"I am resigned—I am thankful—I will try to be more so—but I cannot be glad."

General Clarendon's bulletins continued with little variation for some time; they were always to his sister—he never mentioned Beauclerc, but confined himself to the few lines or words necessary to give his promised regular accounts of Mr Churchill's state, the sum of which continued to be for a length of time: "Much the same."—"Not in immediate danger."—"Cannot be pronounced out of danger."

Not very consolatory, Helen felt. "But while there is life, there is hope," as Aunt Pennant observed.

"Yes, and fear," said Helen; and her hopes and fears on this subject alternated with fatiguing reiteration, and with a total incapacity of forming any judgment.

Beauclerc's letter of explanation arrived, and other letters came from him from time to time, which, as they were only repetitions of hopes and fears as to Churchill's recovery, and of uncertainty as to what might be his own future fate, only increased Helen's misery; and as even their expressions of devoted attachment could not alter her own determination, while she felt how cruel her continued silence must appear, they only agitated without relieving her mind. Mrs Pennant sympathised with and soothed her, and knew how to soothe, and how to raise, and to sustain a mind in sorrow, suffering under disappointed affection, and sunk almost to despondency; for Aunt Pennant, besides her softness of manner, and her quick intelligent sympathy, had power of consolation of a higher sort, beyond any which this world can give. She was very religious, of a cheerfully religious turn of mind—of that truly Christian spirit which hopeth all things. When she was a child somebody asked her if she was bred up in the fear of the Lord. She said no, but in the love of God. And so she was, in that love which casteth out fear. And now the mildness of her piety, and the whole tone and manner of her speaking and thinking, reminded Helen of that good dear uncle by whom she had been educated. She listened with affectionate reverence, and she truly and simply said, "You do me good—I think you have done me a great deal of good—and you shall see it." And she did see it afterwards, and Miss Clarendon thought it was her doing, and so her aunt let it pass, and was only glad the good was done.

The first day Helen went down to the drawing-room, she found there a man who looked, as she thought at first glance, like a tradesman—some person, she supposed, come on business, standing waiting for Miss Clarendon, or Mrs Pennant. She scarcely looked at him, but passed on to the sofa, beside which was a little table set for her, and on it a beautiful work-box, which she began to examine and admire.

"Not nigh so handsome as I could have wished it, then, for you, Miss Helen—I ask pardon, Miss Stanley."

Helen looked up, surprised at hearing herself addressed by one whom she had thought a stranger; but yet she knew the voice, and a reminiscence came across her mind of having seen him somewhere before.

"Old David Price, ma'am. May be you forget him, you being a child at that time. But since you grew up, you have been the saving of me and many more——" Stepping quite close to her, he whispered that he had been paid under her goodness's order by Mr James, along with *the other creditors* that had been *left*.

Helen by this time recollected who the poor Welshman was—an upholsterer and cabinetmaker, who had been years before employed at the Deanery. Never having been paid at the time, a very considerable debt had accumulated, and having neither note nor bond, Price said that he had despaired of ever obtaining the amount of his earnings. He had, however, since the dean's death, been paid in full, and had been able to retire to his native village, which happened to be near Llansillen, and most grateful he was; and as soon as he perceived that he was recognised, his gratitude became better able to express itself. Not well, however, could it make its way out for some time; between crying and laughing, and between two lan-

guages, he was at first scarcely intelligible. Whenever much moved, David Price had recourse to his native Welsh, in which he was eloquent; and Mrs Pennant, on whom, knowing that she understood him, his eyes turned, was good enough to interpret for him. And when once fairly set a-going, there was danger that poor David's garrulous gratitude should flow for ever. But it was all honest; not a word of flattery; and his old face was in a glow and radiant with feeling, and the joy of telling Miss Helen all, how, and about it; particularly concerning the last day when Mr James paid him, and them, and all of them: that was a day Miss Stanley ought to have seen; pity she could not have witnessed it; it would have done her good to the latest hour of her life. Pity she should never see the faces of many, some poorer they might have been than himself; many richer, that would have been ruined for ever but for her. For his own part, he reckoned himself one of the happiest of them all, in being allowed to see her face to face. And he hoped, as soon as she was able to get out so far—but it was not so far—she would come to see how comfortable he was in his own house. It ended at last in his giving a shove to the work-box on the table, which, though nothing worth otherwise, he knew she could not mislike, on account it was made out of all the samples of wood the dean, her uncle, had given to him in former times.

Notwithstanding the immoderate length of his speeches, and the impossibility he seemed to find of ending his visit, Helen was not much tired. And when she was able to walk so far, Mrs Pennant took her to see David Price, and in a most comfortable house she found him; and every one in that house, down to the youngest child, gathered round her by degrees, some more, some less shy, but all with gratitude beaming and smiling in their faces. It was delightful to Helen;

for there is no human heart so engrossed by sorrow, so overwhelmed by disappointment, so closed against hope of happiness, that will not open to the touch of gratitude.

Chapter xliv.

BUT there was still in Helen's inmost soul one deceitful hope. She thought she had pulled it up by the roots many times, and the last time completely; but still a little fibre lurked, and still it grew again. It was the hope that Cecilia would keep that last promise, though at the moment Helen had flung from her the possibility; yet now she took it up again, and she thought it was possible that Cecilia might be true to her word. IF her child should be born alive, and IF it should be a boy! It became a heart-beating suspense as the time approached, and every day the news might be expected. The post came in but three times a week at Llansillen, and every post-day Miss Clarendon repeated her prophecy to her aunt, "You will see, ma'am, the child will be born in good time, and alive. You who have always been so much afraid for Lady Cecilia, will find she has not feeling enough to do her any harm."

In due time came a note from the general. "A boy! child and mother doing well. Give me joy."

The joy to Miss Clarendon was much increased by the triumph in her own perfectly right opinion. Mrs Pennant's was pure affectionate joy for the father, and for Lady Cecilia, for whom, all sinner as she was in her niece's eyes, this good soul had compassion. Helen's anxiety to hear again and again every post was very natural, the aunt thought; quite superfluous, the niece deemed it: Lady Cecilia would do very

well, no doubt, she prophesied again, and laughed at the tremor, the eagerness, with which Helen every day asked if there was any letter from Cecilia. At last one came, the first in her own handwriting, and it was to Helen herself, and it extinguished all hope. Helen could only articulate, "Oh! Cecilia!"

Her emotion, her disappointment, were visible, but unaccountable: she could give no reason for it to Miss Clarendon, whose wondering eye was upon her; nor even to sympathising Aunt Pennant could she breathe a word without betraying Cecilia. She was silent, and there was all that day, and many succeeding days, a hopelessness of languor in her whole appearance. There was, as Miss Clarendon termed it, a "back-sliding in her recovery," which grieved Aunt Pennant, and Helen had to bear imputation of caprice, and of indolence from Miss Clarendon; but even that eye immediately upon her, that eye more severe than ever, had not power to rouse her. Her soul was sunk within, nothing farther to hope; there was a dead calm, and the stillness and loneliness of Llansillen made that calm almost awful. The life of great excitation which she had led previous to her illness, rendered her more sensible of the change, of the total want of stimulus. The walks to Price's cottage had been repeated, but, though it was a very bright spot, the eye could not always be fixed upon it.

Bodily exertion being more easy to her now than mental, she took long walks, and came in boasting how far she had been, and looking quite exhausted. And Miss Clarendon wondered at her wandering out alone; then she tried to walk with Miss Clarendon, and she was more tired, though the walks were shorter—and that was observed, and was not agreeable either to the observer, or to the observed. Helen endeavoured to make up for it; she followed Miss Clarendon about in

all her various occupations, from flower-garden to conservatory, and from conservatory to pheasantry, and to all her pretty cottages, and her schools, and she saw and admired all the good that Esther did so judiciously, and with such extraordinary, such wonderful energy.

"Nothing wonderful in it," Miss Clarendon said: and as she ungraciously rejected praise, however sincere, and required not sympathy, Helen was reduced to be a mere silent, stupid, useless stander-by, and she could not but feel this a little awkward. She tried to interest herself for the poor people in the neighbourhood, but their language was unintelligible to her, and hers to them, and it is hard work trying to make objects for oneself in quite a new place, and with a preoccupying sorrow in the mind all the time. It was not only hard work to Helen, but it seemed labour in vain—bringing soil by handfuls to a barren rock, where, after all, no plant will take root. Miss Clarendon thought that labour could never be in vain.

One morning, when it must be acknowledged that Helen had been sitting too long in the same position, with her head leaning on her hand, Miss Clarendon in her abrupt voice asked, "How much longer, Helen, do you intend to sit there, doing only what is the worst thing in the world for you—thinking?"

Helen started, and said she feared she had been sitting too long idle.

"If you wish to know how long, I can tell you," said Miss Clarendon; "just one hour and thirteen minutes."

"By the stop watch," said Helen, smiling.

"By my watch," said grave Miss Clarendon; "and in the meantime look at the quantity of work I have done."

"And done so nicely!" said Helen, looking at it with admiration.

"Oh, do not think to bribe me with admiration; I would rather see you do something yourself than hear you praise my doings."

"If I had anybody to work for. I have so few friends now in the world who would care for anything I could do! But I will try—you shall see, my dear Esther, by-and-by."

"By-and-by! no, no—now. I cannot bear to see you any longer, in this half-alive, half-dead state."

"I know," said Helen, "that all you say is for my good. I am sure your only object is my happiness."

"Your happiness is not in my power or in yours, but it is in your power to deserve to be happy, by doing what is right—by exerting yourself:—that is my object, for I see you are in danger of being lost in indolence. Now you have the truth and the whole truth."

Many a truth would have come mended from Miss Clarendon's tongue, if it had been uttered in a softer tone, and if she had paid a little more attention to times and seasons; but she held it the sacred duty of sincerity to tell a friend her faults as soon as seen, and without circumlocution.

The next day Helen set about a drawing. She made it an object to herself, to try to copy a view of the dear Deanery in the same style as several beautiful drawings of Miss Clarendon's.

While she looked over her portfolio, several of her old sketches recalled remembrances which made her sigh frequently; Miss Clarendon heard her, and said —"I wish you would cure yourself of that habit of sighing; it is very bad for you."

"I know it," said Helen.

"Despondency is not penitence," continued Esther: "reverie is not reparation."

She felt as desirous as ever to make Helen happy

at Llansillen, but she was provoked to find it impossible to do so. Of a strong body herself, capable of great resistance, powerful reaction under disappointment or grief, she could ill make allowance for feebler health and spirits—perhaps feebler character. For great misfortunes she had great sympathy, but she could not enter into the details of lesser sorrows, especially any of the sentimental kind, which she was apt to class altogether under the head—"Sorrows of my Lord Plumcake!" an expression which had sovereignly taken her fancy, and which her aunt did not relish, or quite understand.

Mrs Pennant was, indeed, as complete a contrast to her niece in these points, as nature and habit joined could produce. She was naturally of the most exquisitely sympathetic mimosa-sensibility, shrinking and expanding to the touch of others' joy or woe; and instead of having by long use worn this out, she had preserved it wonderfully fresh in advanced years. But, notwithstanding the contrast and seemingly incompatible difference between this aunt and niece, the foundations of their characters both being good, sound, and true, they lived on together well, and loved each other dearly. They had seldom differed so much on any point as in the present case, as to their treatment of their patient and their guest. Scarcely a day passed in which they did not come to some mutual remonstrance; and sometimes when she was by, which was not pleasant to her, as may be imagined. Yet perhaps even these little altercations and annoyances, though they tried Helen's temper or grieved her heart at the moment, were of use to her upon the whole, by drawing her out of herself. Besides, these daily vicissitudes —made by human temper, manner, and character— supplied in some sort the total want of events, and broke the monotony of these tedious months.

The general's bulletins, however, became at last more favourable: Mr Churchill was decidedly better; his physician hoped he might soon be pronounced out of danger. The general said nothing of Beauclerc, but that he was, he believed, still at Paris. And from this time forward no more letters came from Beauclerc to Helen; as his hopes of Churchill's recovery increased, he expected every day to be released from his banishment, and was resolved to write no more, till he could say that he was free. But Helen, though she did not allow it to herself, felt this deeply: she thought that her determined silence had at last convinced him that all pursuit of her was vain; and that he submitted to her rejection: she told herself it was what should be, and yet she felt it bitterly. Lady Cecilia's letters did not mention him, indeed they scarcely told anything; they had become short and constrained: the general, she said, advised her to go out more, and her letters often concluded in haste, with "Carriage at the door," and all the usual excuses of a London life.

One day when Helen was sitting intently drawing, Miss Clarendon said "Helen!" so suddenly, that she started and looked round; Miss Clarendon was seated on a low stool at her aunt's feet, with one arm thrown over her great dog's neck; he had laid his head on her lap, and resting on him, she looked up with a steadiness, a fixity of repose, which brought to Helen's mind Raphael's beautiful figure of Fortitude leaning on her lion; she thought she had never before seen Miss Clarendon look so handsome, so graceful, so interesting; she took care not to say so, however.

"Helen!" continued Miss Clarendon, "do you remember the time when I was at Clarendon Park and quitted it so abruptly? My reasons were good, whatever my manner was; the opinion of the world I am

not apt to fear for myself, or even for my brother, but to the whispers of conscience I do listen. Helen! I was conscious that certain feelings in my mind were too strong—in me, you would scarcely believe it—too tender. I had no reason to think that Granville Beauclerc liked me; it was therefore utterly unfit that I should think of him: I felt this, I left Clarendon Park, and from that moment I have refused myself the pleasure of his society, I have altogether ceased to think of him. This is the only way to conquer a hopeless attachment. But you, Helen, though you have commanded him never to attempt to see you again, have not been able to command your own mind. Since Mr Churchill is so much better, you expect that he will soon be pronounced out of danger—you expect that Mr Beauclerc will come over—come here, and be at your feet!"

"I expect nothing," said Helen, in a faltering voice, and then added resolutely, "I cannot foresee what Mr Beauclerc may do, but of this be assured, Miss Clarendon, that until I stand as I once stood, and as I deserve to stand, in the opinion of your brother; unless, above all, I can bring *proofs* to Granville's confiding heart, that I have ever been unimpeachable of conduct and of mind, and in all but one circumstance true—true as yourself, Esther—never, never, though your brother and all the world consented, never till I myself felt that I was *proved* to be as worthy to be his wife as I think I am, would I consent to marry him—no, not though my heart were to break."

"I believe it," said Mrs Pennant; "and I wish—oh, how I wish——"

"That Lady Cecilia were hanged, as she deserves," said Miss Clarendon: "so do I, I am sure; but that is nothing to the present purpose."

"No, indeed," said Helen.

"Helen!" continued Esther, "remember that Lady Blanche Forrester is at Paris."

Helen shrank.

"Lady Cecilia tells you there is no danger; I say there is."

"Why should you say so, my dear Esther?" said her aunt.

"Has not this friend of yours always deceived, misled you, Helen?"

"She can have no motive for deceiving me in this," said Helen: "I believe her."

"Believe her then!" cried Miss Clarendon; "believe her, and do not believe me, and take the consequences: I have done."

Helen sighed, but though she might feel the want of the charm of Lady Cecilia's suavity of manner, of her agreeable, and her agreeing temper, yet she felt the safe solidity of principle in her present friend, and admired, esteemed, and loved, without fear of change, her unblenching truth. Pretty ornaments of gold cannot be worked out of the native ore; to fashion the rude mass some alloy must be used, and when the slight filigree of captivating manner comes to be tested against the sterling worth of unalloyed sincerity, weighed in the just balance of adversity, we are glad to seize the solid gold and leave the ornaments to those that they deceive.

The fear about Lady Blanche Forrester was, however, soon set at rest, and this time Lady Cecilia was right. A letter from her to Helen announced that Lady Blanche was married!—actually married, and not to Granville Beauclerc, but to some other English gentleman at Paris, no matter whom. Lord Beltravers and Madame de St Cymon, disappointed, had returned to London; Lady Cecilia had seen Lord Beltravers, and heard the news from him. There could be no doubt of the truth of the intelligence, and scarcely did

Helen herself rejoice in it with more sincerity than did Miss Clarendon, and Helen loved her for her candour as well as for her sympathy.

Time passed on; week after week rolled away. At last General Clarendon announced to his sister, but without one word to Helen, that Mr Churchill was pronounced out of danger. The news had been sent to his ward, the general said, and he expected Granville would return from his banishment immediately.

Quite taken up in the first tumult of her feelings at this intelligence, Helen scarcely observed that she had no letter from Cecilia. But even Aunt Pennant was obliged to confess, in reply to her niece's observation, that this was "certainly very odd! but we shall soon hear some explanation, I hope."

Miss Clarendon shook her head; she said that she had always thought how matters would end; she judged from her brother's letters that he began to find out that he was not the happiest of men. Yet nothing to that effect was ever said by him; one phrase only excepted in his letter to her on her last birthday, which began with, "In our happy days, my dear Esther."

Miss Clarendon said nothing to Helen upon this subject; she refrained altogether from mentioning Lady Cecilia.

Two, three post-days passed without bringing any letter to Helen. The fourth, very early in the morning, long before the usual time for the arrival of the post, Rose came into her room with a letter in her hand, saying, "From General Clarendon, ma'am. His own man, Mr Cockburn, has just this minute arrived, ma'am—from London."

With a trembling hand, Helen tore the letter open; not one word from General Clarendon! It was only a cover, containing two notes; one from Lord Davenant to the general, the other from Lady Davenant to Helen.

Lord Davenant said that Lady Davenant's health had declined so alarmingly after their arrival at Petersburgh, that he had insisted upon her return to England, and that as soon as the object of his mission was completed, he should immediately follow her. A vessel, he said, containing letters from England, had been lost, so that they were in total ignorance of what had occurred at home; and, indeed, it appeared from the direction of Lady Davenant's note to Helen, written on her landing in England, that she had left Russia without knowing that the marriage had been broken off, or that Helen had quitted General Clarendon's. She wrote—"Let me see you and Granville once more before I die. Be in London, at my own house, to meet me. I shall be there as soon as I can be moved."

The initials only of her name were signed. Elliot added a postscript, saying that her lady had suffered much from an unusually long passage, and that she was not sure what day they could be in town.

There was nothing from Lady Cecilia.—Cockburn said that her ladyship had not been at home when he set out; that his master had ordered him to travel all night, to get to Llansillen as fast as possible, and to make no delay in delivering the letter to Miss Stanley.

To set out instantly, to be in town at her house to meet Lady Davenant, was, of course, Helen's immediate determination. General Clarendon had sent his travelling carriage for her; and under the circumstances, her friends could have no wish but to speed her departure. Miss Clarendon expressed surprise at there being no letter from Lady Cecilia, and would see and question Cockburn herself; but nothing more was to be learned than what he had already told, that the packet from Lady Davenant had come by express to his master after Lady Cecilia had driven out, as it had been her custom of late, almost every day, to Kensing-

ton, to see her child. Nothing could be more natural, Mrs Pennant thought, and she only wondered at Esther's unconvinced look of suspicion. "Nothing, surely, can be more natural, my dear Esther." To which Esther replied, "Very likely, ma'am."

Helen was too much hurried and too much engrossed by the one idea of Lady Davenant to think of what they said. At parting she had scarcely time even to thank her two friends for all their kindness, but they understood her feelings, and, as Miss Clarendon said, words on that point were unnecessary. Aunt Pennant embraced her again and again, and then let her go, saying, "I must not detain you, my dear."

"But I must," said Miss Clarendon, "for one moment. There is one point on which my parting words are necessary. Helen! keep clear of Lady Cecilia's affairs, whatever they may be. Hear none of her secrets."

Helen wished she had never heard any; did not believe there were any more to hear; but she promised herself and Miss Clarendon that she would observe this excellent counsel.

And now she was in the carriage, and on her road to town. And now she had leisure to breathe, and to think, and to feel. Her thoughts and feelings, however, could be only repetitions of fears and hopes about Lady Davenant, and uncertainty and dread of what would happen when she should require explanation of all that had occurred in her absence. And how would Lady Cecilia be able to meet her mother's penetration?—ill or well, Lady Davenant was so clear-sighted. "And how shall I," thought Helen, "without plunging deeper in deceit, avoid revealing the truth? Shall I assist Cecilia to deceive her mother in her last moments; or shall I break my promise, betray Cecilia's secret, and at last be the death of her mother by the shock?" It is

astonishing how often the mind can go over the same thoughts and feelings without coming to any conclusion, any ease from racking suspense. In the meantime, on rolled the carriage, and Cockburn, according to his master's directions, got her over the ground with all conceivable speed.

Chapter xlv.

WHEN they were within the last stage of London, the carriage suddenly stopped, and Helen, who was sitting far back, deep in her endless reverie, started forward—Cockburn was at the carriage-door.

"My lady, coming to meet you, Miss Stanley."

It was Cecilia herself. But Cecilia so changed in her whole appearance, that Helen would scarcely have known her. She was so much struck that she hardly knew what was said: but the carriage-doors were opened, and Lady Cecilia was beside her, and Cockburn shut the door without permitting one moment's delay, and on they drove.

Lady Cecilia was excessively agitated. Helen had not power to utter a word, and was glad that Cecilia went on speaking very fast; though she spoke without appearing to know well what she was saying: of Helen's goodness in coming so quickly, of her fears that she would never have been in time—"but she was in time—her mother had not yet arrived. Clarendon had gone to meet her on the road, she believed—she was not quite certain."

That seemed very extraordinary to Helen. "Not quite certain?" said she.

"No, I am not," replied Cecilia, and she coloured;

her very pale cheek flushed; but she explained not at all, she left that subject, and spoke of the friends Helen had left at Llansillen—then suddenly of her mother's return—her hopes—her fears—and then, without going on to the natural idea of seeing her mother, and of how soon they should see her, began to talk of Beauclerc—of Mr Churchill's being quite out of danger—of the general's expectation of Beauclerc's immediate return. "And then, my dearest Helen," said she, "all will be——

"Oh! I do not know how it will be!" cried she, her tone changing suddenly; and, from the breathless hurry in which she had been running on, sinking at once to a low broken tone, and speaking very slowly. "I cannot tell what will become of any of us. We can never be happy again—any one of us. And it is all my doing—and I cannot die. Oh! Helen, when I tell you——"

She stopped, and Miss Clarendon's warning counsel, all her own past experience, were full in Helen's mind; and after a moment's silence, she stopped Cecilia just as she seemed to have gathered power to speak, and begged that she would not tell her anything that was to be kept secret. She could not, would not hear any secrets; she turned her head aside, and let down the glass, and looked out, as if determined not to be compelled to receive this confidence.

"Have you, then, lost all interest, all affection for me, Helen? I deserve it!—But you need not fear me now, Helen: I have done with deception, would to Heaven I had never begun with it!"

It was the tone and look of truth—she steadily fixed her eyes upon Helen—and instead of the bright beams that used to play in those eyes, there was now a dark deep-seated sorrow, almost despair. Helen was touched to the heart: it was indeed impossible for her, it would have been impossible for any one who had any feeling,

to have looked upon Lady Cecilia Clarendon at that moment, and to have recollected what she had so lately been, without pity. The friend of her childhood looked upon her with all the poignant anguish of compassion—

"Oh! my dear Cecilia! how changed!"

Helen was not sensible that she uttered the words "how changed!"

"Changed! yes! I believe I am," said Lady Cecilia, in a calm voice, "very much changed in appearance, but much more in reality; my mind is more altered than my person. Oh! Helen! if you could see into my mind at this moment, and know how completely it is changed;—but it is all in vain now! You have suffered, and suffered for me! but your sufferings could not equal mine. You lost love and happiness, but still conscious of deserving both: I had both at my command, and I could enjoy neither under the consciousness, the torture of remorse."

Helen threw her arms round her, and exclaimed, "Do not think of me!—all will be well—since you have resolved on the truth, all will yet be well."

Cecilia sighed deeply and went on—"I am sure, Helen, you were surprised that my child was born alive; at least I was. I believe its mother had not feeling enough to endanger its existence. Well, Clarendon has that comfort at all events, and, as a boy, it will never put him in mind of his mother. Well, Helen, I had hopes of myself to the last minute; I really and truly hoped, as I told you, that I should have had courage to tell him all when I put the child into his arms. But his joy!—I could not dash his joy—I could not!—and then I thought I never could. I knew you would give me up; I gave up all hope of myself. I was very unhappy, and Clarendon thought I was very ill; and I acknowledge that I was anxious

about you, and let all the blame fall on you, innocent, generous creature!—I heard my husband perpetually upbraiding you when he saw me ill—all, he said, the consequences of your falsehood—and all the time I knew it was my own.

"My dear Helen, it is impossible to tell you all the daily, hourly necessities for dissimulation which occurred. Every day, you know, we were to send to inquire for Mr Churchill; and every day when Clarendon brought me the bulletin, he pitied me, and blamed you; and the double-dealing in my countenance he never suspected—always interpreted favourably. Oh, such confidence as he had in me—and how it has been wasted, abused! Then letters from Beauclerc—how I bore to hear them read I cannot conceive: and at each time that I escaped, I rejoiced and reproached myself—and reproached myself and rejoiced. I succeeded in every effort at deception, and was cursed by my own success. Encouraged to proceed, I soon went on without shame and without fear. The general heard me defending you against the various reports which my venomous cousin had circulated, and he only admired what he called 'my amiable zeal.' His love for me increased, but it gave me no pleasure: for, Helen, now I am going to tell you an extraordinary turn which my mind took, for which I cannot account—I can hardly believe it—it seems out of human nature—my love for him decreased!—not only because I felt that he would hate me if he discovered my deceit, but because he was lowered in my estimation! I had always had, as everybody has, even my mother, the highest opinion of his judgment. To that judgment I had always looked up; it had raised me in my own opinion; it was a motive to me to be equal to what he thought me: but now that motive was gone, I no longer looked up to him; his credulous

affection had blinded his judgment—he was my dupe! I could not reverence—I could not love one who was my dupe. But I cannot tell you how shocked I was at myself, when I felt my love for him decrease every time I saw him.

"I thought myself a monster; I had grown used to everything but that—that I could not endure; it was a darkness of the mind—a coldness; it was as if the sun had gone out of the universe; it was more—it was worse—it was as if I was alone in the world. Home was a desert to me. I went out every evening; sometimes, but rarely, Clarendon accompanied me: he had become more retired; his spirits had declined with mine; and though he was glad I should go out and amuse myself, yet he was always exact as to the hours of my return. I was often late—later than I ought to have been, and I made a multitude of paltry excuses; this it was, I believe, which first shook his faith in my truth; but I was soon detected in a more decided failure.

"You know I never had the least taste for play of any kind: you may remember I used to be scolded for never minding what I was about at ecarté: in short, I never had the least love for it—it wearied me; but now that my spirits were gone, it was a sort of intoxication in which I cannot say I indulged—for it was no indulgence, but to which I had recourse. Louisa Castlefort, you know, was always fond of play—got into her first difficulties by that means—she led me on. I lost a good deal of money to her, and did not care about it as long as I could pay; but presently it came to a time when I could not pay without applying to the general: I applied to him, but under false pretences—to pay this bill or that, or to buy something, which I never bought: this occurred so often and to such extent, that he suspected—he discovered how it went;

he told me so. He spoke in that low, suppressed, that terrible voice which I heard once before; I said I know not what, in deprecation of his anger. 'I am not angry, Cecilia,' said he. I caught his hand, and would have detained him; he withdrew that hand, and, looking at me, exclaimed, 'Beautiful creature! half those charms would I give for *truth!*' He left the room, and there was contempt in his look.

"All my love—all my reverence, returned for him in an instant; but what could I say? He never recurred to the subject; and now, when I saw the struggle in his mind, my passion for him returned in all its force.

"People who flattered me often, you know, said I was fascinating, and I determined to use my powers of fascination to regain my husband's heart; how little I knew that heart! I dressed to please him—oh! I never dressed myself with such care in my most coquettish days;—I gave a splendid ball; I dressed to please him—he used to be delighted with my dancing: he had said, no matter what, but I wanted to make him say it—feel it again; he neither said, nor felt it. I saw him standing looking at me, and at the close of the dance I heard from him one sigh. I was more in love with him than when first we were married, and he saw it, but that did not restore me to his confidence—his esteem; nothing could have done that, but—what I had not. One step in dissimulation led to another.

"After Lord Beltravers returned from Paris on Lady Blanche's marriage, I used to meet him continually at Louisa Castlefort's. As for play, that was over with me for ever, but I went to Louisa's continually, because it was the gayest house I could go to; I used to meet Lord Beltravers there, and he pretended to pay me a vast deal of attention, to which

I was utterly indifferent, but his object was to push his sister into society again by my means. He took advantage of that unfortunate note which I had received from Madame de St Cymon, when she was at Old Forest; he wanted me to admit her among my acquaintance; he urged it in every possible way, and was excessively vexed that it would not do: not that he cared for her; he often spoke of her in a way that shocked me, but it hurt his pride that she should be excluded from the society to which her rank entitled her. I had met her at Louisa's once or twice; but when I found that for her brother's sake she was always to be invited, I resolved to go there no more, and I made a merit of this with Clarendon. He was pleased; he said, 'That is well, that is right, my dear Cecilia.' And he went out more with me. One night at the Opera, the Comtesse de St Cymon was in the box opposite to us, no lady with her, only some gentlemen. She watched me; I did all I could to avoid her eye, but at an unlucky moment she caught mine, bent forward, and had the assurance to bow. The general snatched the opera-glass from my hand, made sure who it was, and then said to me—

"'How does that woman dare to claim your notice, Lady Cecilia? I am afraid there must have been some encouragement on your part.'

"'None,' said I, 'nor ever shall be; you see I take no notice.'

"'But you must have taken notice, or this could never be!'

"'No indeed!' persisted I.

"Helen! I really forgot at the moment that first unfortunate note. An instant afterwards I recollected it, and the visit about the cameos, but that was not my fault. I had, to be sure, dropped a card in return at her door, and I ought to have mentioned that, but I

really did not recollect it till the words had passed my lips, and then it was too late, and I did not like to go back and spoil my case by an exception. The general did not look quite satisfied; he did not receive my assertions as implicitly as formerly. He left the box afterwards to speak to some one, and while he was gone in came Lord Beltravers. After some preliminary nothings, he went directly to the point; and said in an assured manner, 'I believe you do not know my sister at this distance. She has been endeavouring to catch your eye.'

"'The Comtesse de St Cymon does me too much honour,' said I, with a slight inclination of the head, and elevation of the eyebrow, which spoke sufficiently plainly.

"Unabashed, and with a most provoking, almost sneering look, he replied, 'Madame de St Cymon had wished to say a few words to your ladyship on your own account; am I to understand this cannot be?'

"'On my own account?' said I, 'I do not in the least understand your lordship.' 'I am not sure,' said he, 'that I perfectly comprehend it. But I know that you sometimes drive to Kensington, and sometimes take a turn in the gardens there. My sister lives at Kensington, and could not she, without infringing etiquette, meet you in your walk, and have the honour of a few words with you? Something she wants to say to you,' and here he lowered his voice, 'about a locket, and Colonel D'Aubigny.'

"Excessively frightened, and hearing some one at the door, I answered, 'I do not know, I believe I shall drive to Kensington to-morrow.' He bowed delighted, and relieved me from his presence that instant. The moment afterwards General Clarendon came in. He asked me, 'Was not that Lord Beltravers whom I met?'

"'Yes,' said I; 'he came to reproach me for not

noticing his sister, and I answered him in such a manner as to make him clear that there was no hope.'

"'You did right,' said he, 'if you did so.' My mind was in such confusion that I could not quite command my countenance, and I put up my fan as if the lights hurt me.

"'Cecilia,' said he, 'take care what you are about. Remember, it is not my request only, but my command to my wife' (he laid solemn stress on the words) 'that she should have no communication with this woman.'

"'My dear Clarendon, I have not the least wish.'

"'I do not ask what your wishes may be; I require only your obedience.'

"Never have I heard such austere words from him. I turned to the stage, and I was glad to seize the first minute I could to get away. But what was to be done? If I did not go to Kensington, there was this locket, and I knew not what, standing out against me. I knew that this wretched woman had had Colonel D'Aubigny in her train abroad, and supposed that he must—treacherous profligate as he was—have given the locket to her, and now I was so afraid of its coming to Clarendon's eyes or ears! — and yet why should I have feared his knowing about it? Colonel D'Aubigny stole it, just as he stole the picture. I had got it for you, do you recollect?"

"Perfectly," said Helen, "and your mother missed it."

"Yes," continued Lady Cecilia. "Oh that I had had the sense to do nothing about it! But I was so afraid of its somehow bringing everything to light: my cowardice—my conscience—my consciousness of that first fatal falsehood before my marriage, has haunted me at the most critical moments: it has risen against me, and stood like an evil spirit threatening me from the right path.

"I went to Kensington, trusting to my own good fortune, which had so often stood me in stead; but Madame de St Cymon was too cunning for me, and so interested, so mean, she actually bargained for giving up the locket. She hinted that she knew Colonel D'Aubigny had never been your lover, and ended by saying she had not the locket with her; and though I made her understand that the general would never allow me to receive her at my own house, yet she 'hoped I could manage an introduction for her to some of my friends, and that she would bring the locket on Monday, if I would in the meantime try, at least with Lady Emily Greville and Mrs Holdernesse.'

"I felt her meanness, and yet I was almost as mean myself, for I agreed to do what I could. Monday came, Clarendon saw me as I was going out, and, as he handed me into the carriage, he asked me where I was going. To Kensington I said, and added—oh! Helen, I am ashamed to tell you, I added—'I am going to see my child.' And there I found Madame de St Cymon, and I had to tell her of my failure with Lady Emily and Mrs Holdernesse. I softened their refusal as much as I could, but I might have spared myself the trouble, for she only retorted by something about English prudery. At this moment a shower of rain came on, and she insisted upon my taking her home; 'Come in,' said she, when the carriage stopped at her door: 'if you will come in, I will give it to you now, and you need not have the trouble of calling again.' I had the folly to yield, though I saw that it was a trick to decoy me into her house, and to make it pass for a visit. It all flashed upon me, and yet I could not resist, for I thought I must obtain the locket at all hazards. I resolved to get it from her before I left the house, and then I thought all would be finished.

"She looked triumphant as she followed me into her saloon, and gave a malicious smile, which seemed to say, 'You see you are visiting me after all.' After some nonsensical conversation, meant to detain me, I pressed for the locket, and she produced it: it was indeed the very one that had been made for you—But just at that instant, while she still held it in her hand, the door suddenly opened, and Clarendon stood opposite to me!

"I heard Madame de St Cymon's voice, but of what she said, I have no idea. I heard nothing but the single word 'rain,' and with scarcely strength to articulate, I attempted to follow up that excuse. Clarendon's look of contempt!—But he commanded himself, advanced calmly to me, and said, 'I came to Kensington with these letters; they have just arrived by express. Lady Davenant is in England—she is ill.' He gave me the packet, and left the room, and I heard the sound of his horses' feet the next instant as he rode off. I broke from Madame de St Cymon, forgetting the locket and everything. I asked my servants which way the general had gone? 'To town.' I perceived that he must have been going to look for me at the nurse's, and had seen the carriage at Madame de St Cymon's door. I hastened after him, and then I recollected that I had left the locket on the table at Madame de St Cymon's, that locket for which I had hazarded—lost—everything! The moment I reached home, I ran to Clarendon's room; he was not there, and oh! Helen, I have not seen him since!

"From some orders which he left about horses, I suppose he went to meet my mother. I dared not follow him. She had desired me to wait for her arrival at her own house. All yesterday, all last night, Helen, what I have suffered! I could not bear it any

longer, and then I thought of coming to meet you. I thought I must see you before my mother arrived—my mother! but Clarendon will not have met her till to-day. Oh, Helen! you feel all that I fear—all that I foresee."

Lady Cecilia sank back, and Helen, overwhelmed with all she had heard, could for some time only pity her in silence; and at last could only suggest that the general would not have time for any private communication with Lady Davenant, as her woman would be in the carriage with her, and the general was on horseback.

It was late in the day before they reached town. As they came near Grosvenor Square, Cockburn inquired whether they were to drive home, or to Lady Davenant's?

"To my mother's, certainly, and as fast as you can."

Lady Davenant had not arrived, but there were packages in the hall, her courier, and her servants, who said that General Clarendon was with her, but not in the carriage; he had sent them on. No message for Lady Cecilia, but that Lady Davenant would be in town this night.

To-night—some hours still of suspense! As long as there were arrangements to be made, anything to do or to think of but that meeting of which they dared not think, it was endurable. But too soon all was settled; nothing to be done, but to wait and watch, to hear the carriages roll past, and listen, and start, and look at each other, and sink back disappointed. Lady Cecilia walked from the sofa to the window, and looked out, and back again—continually, continually, till at last Helen begged her to sit down. She sat down before an old pianoforte of her mother's, on which her eyes fixed; it was one on which she had often played with Helen when they were children. "Happy,

innocent days," said she; "never shall we be so happy again, Helen! But I cannot think of it;" she rose hastily, and threw herself on the sofa.

A servant, who had been watching at the hall-door, came in—"The carriage, my lady! Lady Davenant is coming."

Lady Cecilia started up; they ran downstairs; the carriage stopped, and in the imperfect light they saw the figure of Lady Davenant, scarcely altered, leaning upon General Clarendon's arm. The first sound of her voice was feebler, softer, than formerly—quite tender, when she said, as she embraced them both by turns, "My dear children!"

"You have accomplished your journey, Lady Davenant, better than you expected," said the general.

Something struck her in the tone of his voice. She turned quickly, saw her daughter lay her hand upon his arm, and saw that arm withdrawn!

They all entered the saloon—it was a blaze of light; Lady Davenant, shading her eyes with her hand, looked round at the countenances, which she had not yet seen. Lady Cecilia shrank back. The penetrating eyes turned from her, glanced at Helen, and fixed upon the general.

"What is all this?" cried she.

Helen threw her arms round Lady Davenant. "Let us think of you first, and only—be calm."

Lady Davenant broke from her, and pressing forwards exclaimed, "I must see my daughter—if I have still a daughter! Cecilia!"

The general moved. Lady Cecilia, who had sunk upon a chair behind him, attempted to rise. Lady Davenant stood opposite to her; the light was now full upon her face and figure; and her mother saw how it was changed! and looking back at Helen, she said in a low, awful tone, "I see it; the black spot has spread!"

Scarcely had Lady Davenant pronounced these words, when she was seized with violent spasms. The general had but just time to save her from falling; he could not leave her. All was terror! Even her own woman, so long used to these attacks, said it was the worst she had ever seen, and for some time evidently feared it would terminate fatally. At last slowly she came to herself, but perfectly in possession of her intellect, she sat up, looked round, saw the agony in her daughter's countenance, and holding out her hand to her, said, "Cecilia, if there is anything that I ought to know, it should be said now."

Cecilia caught her mother's hand, and threw herself upon her knees. "Helen, Helen, stay!" cried she, "do not go, Clarendon!"

He stood leaning against the chimney-piece, motionless, while Cecilia, in a faltering voice, began; her voice gaining strength, she went on, and poured out all—even from the very beginning, that first suppression of the truth, that first cowardice, then all that followed from that one falsehood—all—even to the last degradation, when in the power, in the presence of that bad woman, her husband found and left her. She shuddered as she came to the thought of that look of his, and not daring, not having once dared while she spoke, to turn towards him, her eyes fixed upon her mother's; but as she finished speaking, her head sank, she laid her face on the sofa beside her; she felt her mother's arm thrown over her, and she sobbed convulsively.

There was silence.

"I have still a daughter!" were the first words that broke the silence. "Not such as I might have had, but that is my own fault."

"Oh, mother!"

"I have still a daughter," repeated Lady Davenant.

"There is," continued she, turning to General Clarendon, "there is a redeeming power in truth. She may yet be more worthy to be your wife than she has ever yet been!"

"Never!" exclaimed the general. His countenance was rigid as iron; then suddenly it relaxed, and going up to Helen, he said—

"I have done you injustice, Miss Stanley. I have been misled. I have done you injustice, and by Heaven! I will do you public justice, cost me what it will. Beauclerc will be in England in a few days. At the altar I will give you to him publicly; in the face of all the world will I mark my approbation of his choice; publicly will I repair the wrong I have done you. I will see his happiness and yours before I leave England for ever!"

Lady Cecilia started up: "Clarendon!" was all she could say.

"Yes, Lady Cecilia Clarendon," said he, all the stern fixedness of his face returning at once—"Yes, Lady Cecilia Clarendon, we separate, now and for ever."

Then turning from her, he addressed Lady Davenant. "I shall be ordered on some foreign service. Your daughter, Lady Davenant, will remain with you, while I am still in England, unless you wish otherwise——"

"Leave my daughter with me, my dear general, till my death," said Lady Davenant. She spoke calmly, but the general, after a respectful — an affectionate pressure of the hand she held out to him, said, "That may be far distant, I trust in God, and we shall at all events meet again the day of Helen's marriage."

"And if that day is to be a happy day to me," cried Helen, "to me or to your own beloved ward, General Clarendon, it must be happy to Cecilia!"

"As happy as she has left it in my power to make her. When I am gone, my fortune——"

"Name it not as happiness for my daughter," interrupted Lady Davenant, "or you do her injustice, General Clarendon."

"I name it but to do her justice," said he. "It is all that she has left it in my power to give;" and then his long suppressed passion suddenly busting forth, he turned to Cecilia. "All I can give to one so false—false from the first moment to the last—false to me—to me! who so devotedly, fondly, blindly loved her!" He rushed out of the room.

Then Lady Davenant, taking her daughter in her arms, said, "My child, return to me!"

She sank back exhausted. Mrs Elliott was summoned, she wished them all out of the room, and said so; but Lady Davenant would have her daughter stay beside her, and, with Cecilia's hand in hers, she fell into a profound slumber.

Chapter xlvi.

ON awaking in the morning, after some long-expected event has happened, we feel in doubt whether it has really occurred, or whether it is all a dream. Then comes the awful sense of waking truth, and the fear that what has been done, or said, is irremediable, and then the astonishment that it really is done.

"It is over!" Helen repeated to herself, repeated aloud, before she could well bring herself from that state of half belief, before she could recover her stunned faculties.

Characters which she thought she perfectly under-

stood, had each appeared, in these new circumstances, different from what she had expected. From Cecilia she had scarcely hoped, even at the last moment, for such perfect truth in her confession. From Lady Davenant not so much indulgence, not all that tenderness for her daughter. From the general, less violence of expression, more feeling for Cecilia; he had not allowed the merit of her candour, her courage at the last. It was a perfectly voluntary confession: all that concerned Colonel D'Aubigny, and the letters, could never have been known to the general by any other means. Disappointed love, confidence duped, and his pride of honour, had made him forget himself in anger, even to cruelty. Helen thought he would feel this hereafter, fancied he must feel it even now, but that, though he might relent, he would not recede; though he might regret that he had made the determination, he would certainly abide by it; that which he had resolved to do, would certainly be done—the separation between him and Cecilia would take place. And though all was clear and bright in Helen's own prospects, the general's esteem restored, his approbation to be publicly marked, Beauclerc to be convinced of her perfect innocence! Beauclerc, freed from all fear and danger, returning all love and joy; yet she could not be happy—it was all mixed with bitterness, anguish for Cecilia.

She had so often so forcibly urged her to this confession! and now it was made, did Helen regret that it was made? No, independently of her own cleared character, she was satisfied, even for Cecilia's sake, for it was right, whatever were the consequences; it was right, and in the confusion and discordance of her thoughts and feelings, this was the only fixed point. To this conclusion she had come, but had not been able farther to settle her mind, when she was told that

Lady Davenant was now awake, and wished to see her.

Lady Davenant, renovated by sleep, appeared to Helen, even when she saw her by daylight, scarcely altered in her looks. There was the same life, and energy, and elasticity, and strength, Helen hoped, not only of mind, but of body. And quick as that hope rose, as she stood beside her bed, and looked upon her, Lady Davenant marked it, and said, "You are mistaken, my dear Helen, I shall not last long; I am now to consider how I am to make the most of the little life that remains. How to repair as far as may be, as far as can be, in my last days, the errors of my youth! You know, Helen, what I mean, and it is now no time to waste words, therefore I shall not begin by wasting upon you, Helen, any reproaches. Foolish, generous, weak creature that you are, and as the best of human beings will ever be—I must be content with you as you are; and so," continued she, in a playful tone, "we must love one another, perhaps all the better, for not being too perfect. And indeed, my poor child, you have been well punished already, and the worst of criminals need not be punished twice. Of the propensity to sacrifice your own happiness for others you will never be cured, but you will, I trust, in future, when I am gone never to return, be true to yourself. Now as to my daughter——"

Lady Davenant then went over with Helen every circumstance in Cecilia's confession, and showed how, in the midst of the shock she had felt at the disclosure of so much falsehood, hope for her daughter's future truth had risen in her mind even from the courage, and fulness, and exactness of her confession. "And it is not," continued she, "a sudden reformation; I have no belief in sudden reformations. I think I see that this change in Cecilia's mind has been some time

working out by her own experience of the misery, the folly, the degradation of deceit."

Helen earnestly confirmed this from her own observations, and from the expressions which had burst forth in the fulness of Cecilia's heart and strength of her conviction, when she told her all that had passed in her mind.

"That is well!" pursued Lady Davenant; "but principles cannot be depended upon till confirmed by habit; and Cecilia's nature is so variable—impressions on her are easily, even deeply made, but all in sand; they may shift with the next tide—may be blown away by the next wind."

"Oh no," exclaimed Helen, "there is no danger of that. I see the impression deepening every hour, from your kindness and——" Helen hesitated, "And besides——"

"*Besides*," said Lady Davenant, "usually comes as the *arrière-ban* of weak reasons: you mean to say that the sight of my sufferings must strengthen, must confirm all her principles—her taste for truth. Yes," continued she, in her most firm tone, "Cecilia's being with me during my remaining days will be painful but salutary to her. She sees, as you do, that all the falsehood meant to save me has been in vain; that at last the shock has only hastened my end: it must be so, Helen. Look at it steadily, in the best point of view —the evil you cannot avert; take the good, and be thankful for it."

And Cecilia—how did she feel? Wretched she was, but still in her wretchedness there was within her a relieved conscience and the sustaining power of truth; and she had now the support of her mother's affection, and the consolation of feeling that she had at last done Helen justice! To her really generous, affectionate disposition, there was in the return of her feelings to

their natural course, an indescribable sense of relief. Broken, crushed, as were all her own hopes, her sympathy, even in the depths of her misery, now went pure, free from any windings of deceit, direct to Helen's happy prospects, in which she shared with all the eagerness of her warm heart.

Beauclerc arrived, found the general at home expecting him, and in his guardian's countenance and voice he saw and heard only what was natural to the man. The general was prepared, and Beauclerc was himself in too great impatience to hear the facts, to attend much to the manner in which things were told.

"Lady Davenant has returned ill; her daughter is with her, and Helen——"

"And Helen——"

"And you may be happy, Beauclerc, if there be truth in woman," said the general. "Go to her—you will find I can do justice. Go, and return when you can tell me that your wedding-day is fixed. And, Beauclerc," he called after him, "let it be as soon as possible."

"The only unnecessary advice my dear guardian has ever given me," Beauclerc, laughing, replied.

The general's prepared composure had not calculated upon this laugh, this slight jest; his features gave way. Beauclerc, struck with a sudden change in the general's countenance, released his hand from the congratulatory shake in which its power failed. The general turned away as if to shun inquiry, and Beauclerc, however astonished, respected his feelings, and said no more. He hastened to Lady Davenant with all a lover's speed—with all a lover's joy saw the first expression in Helen's eyes; and with all a friend's sorrow for Lady Davenant and for the general, heard all that was to be told of Lady Cecilia's affairs: her mother undertook the explanation, Cecilia herself did not appear.

In the first rush of Beauclerc's joy in Helen's cleared fame, he was ready to forgive all the deceit; yes, to forgive all; but it was such forgiveness as contempt can easily grant, which can hardly be received by any soul not lost to honour. This Lady Davenant felt, and felt so keenly, that Helen trembled for her: she remained silent, pressing her hand upon her heart, which told her sense of approaching danger. It was averted by the calmness, the truth, the justice with which Helen spoke to Beauclerc of Cecilia. As she went on, Lady Davenant's colour returned and Beauclerc's ready sympathy went with her as far as she pleased, till she came to one point, from which he instantly started back. Helen proposed, if Beauclerc would consent, to put off their marriage till the general should be reconciled to Cecilia.

"Attempt it not, Helen," cried Lady Davenant; "delay not for any consideration. Your marriage must be as soon as possible, for my sake, for Cecilia's—mark me!—for Cecilia's sake, as soon as possible let it be; it is but justice that her conscience should be so far relieved, let her no longer obstruct your union. Let me have the satisfaction of seeing it accomplished; name the day, Helen, I may not have many to live."

The day, the earliest possible, was named by Helen; and the moment it was settled, Lady Davenant hurried Beauclerc away, saying—"Return to General Clarendon—spare him suspense—it is all we can do for him."

The general's wishes in this, and in all that followed, were to be obeyed. He desired that the marriage should be public, that all should be bidden of rank, fashion, and note—all their family connections. Lady Katrine Hawksby, he especially named. To do justice to Helen seemed the only pleasurable object now remaining to him. In speaking to Beauclerc, he never once named Lady Cecilia; it seemed a tacit compact

between him and Beauclerc, that her name should not be pronounced. They talked of Lady Davenant; the general said he did not think her in such danger as she seemed to consider herself to be: his opinion was, he declared, confirmed by his own observation; by the strength of mind and of body which she had shown since her arrival in England. Beauclerc could only hope that he was right; and the general went on to speak of the service upon which he was to be employed: said that all *arrangements*, laying an emphasis upon the word, would be transacted by his man of business. He spoke of what would happen after he quitted England, and left his ward a legacy of some favourite horse which he used to ride at Clarendon Park, and seemed to take it for granted that Beauclerc and Helen would be sometimes there when he was gone. Then, having cleared his throat several times, the general desired that Lady Cecilia's portrait, which he designated only as "the picture over the chimney-piece in my room," should be sent after him. And taking leave of Beauclerc, he set off for Clarendon Park, where he was to remain till the day before the wedding;—the day following he had fixed for his departure from England.

When Beauclerc was repeating this conversation to Helen, Lady Davenant came into the room just as he was telling these last particulars. She marked the smile, the hope that was excited, but shook her head, and said, "Raise no false hopes in my daughter's mind, I conjure you;" and she turned the conversation to other subjects. Beauclerc had been to see Mr Churchill, and of that visit Lady Davenant wished to hear.

As to health, Beauclerc said that Mr Churchill had recovered almost perfectly; "but there remains, and I fear will always remain, a little lameness, not disabling, but disfiguring—an awkwardness in moving, which, to

a man of his personal pretensions, is trying to the temper; but after noticing the impediment as he advanced to meet me, he shook my hand cordially, and smiling, said, 'You see I am a marked man; I always wished to be so, you know, so pray do not repent, my good friend.' He saw I was too much moved for jesting, then he took it more seriously, but still kindly, assuring me that I had done him real service; it is always of service, he said, to be necessitated to take time for quiet reflection, of which he had had sufficient in his hours of solitary confinement—this little adversity had left him leisure to be good.

"And then," continued Beauclerc, "Churchill, adverting to our foolish quarrel, to clear that off my mind, threw the whole weight of the blame at once comfortably upon the absent—on Beltravers. Churchill said we had indeed been a couple of bravely blind fools; he ought, as he observed, to have recollected in time, that

> 'Anger is like
> A full hot horse, who being allowed his way,
> Self-mettle tires him.'

"So that was good, and Horace, in perfect good-humour with me and himself, and all the world, played on with the past and the future, glad he had no more of his bones to exfoliate; glad, after so many months of failure in 'the first intention,' to find himself in a whole skin, and me safe returned from transportation—spoke of Helen seriously; said that his conduct to her was the only thing that weighed upon his mind, but he hoped that his sincere penitence, and his months of suffering, would be considered as sufficient atonement for his having brought her name before the public; and he finished by inviting himself to our wedding, if it were only for the pleasure of seeing what sort of a face Lady Katrine Hawksby will have

upon the occasion.—It was told of a celebrated statesman, jealous of his colleagues, Horace says, that every commonly good speech cost him a twinge of the gout; and every uncommonly good one sent him to bed with a regular fit. Now Horace protests that every commonly decent marriage of her acquaintance costs Lady Katrine at least a sad headache; but Miss Stanley's marriage, likely as it is to be so happy after all, as he politely said, foredooms poor Lady Katrine to a month's heartache at the least, and a face full ell long."

Whether in his penitence he had forsworn slander or not, it was plain that Churchill had not lost either his taste, talent, or power of sarcasm, and of this Beauclerc could have given, and in time gave, further illustrations; but it was in a case which came home to him rather too nearly, and on which his reports did not flow quite so fluently—touching Lord Beltravers, it was too tender a subject. Beauclerc was ashamed of himself for having been so deceived when, after all his guardian had done to save his fortune, after all that noble sacrifice had been made, he found that it was to no good end, but for the worst purpose possible. Lord Beltravers, as it was now clear, never had the slightest intention of living in that house of his ancestors on which Beauclerc had lavished his thousands, ay, and tens of thousands: but while he was repairing, and embellishing, and furnishing Old Forest, fit for an English aristocrat of the first water, the Lord Beltravers at the gaming-table pledged it, and lost it, and sold it; and it went to the hammer. This came out in the first fury of Lord Beltravers upon his sister's marriage at Paris: and then and there Beauclerc first came to the perception that his good friend had predestined him and his fortune for the Lady Blanche, whom, all the time, he considered as a fool and a puppet, and for

whom he had not the slightest affection: it was all for his own interested purposes.

Beauclerc suddenly opened his eyes wide, and saw it all at once: how it had happened that they had never seen it before, notwithstanding all that the general on one side, and Lady Davenant on the other, had done to force them open, was incomprehensible; but, as Lady Davenant observed, "A sort of cataract comes over the best eyes for a time, and the patient will not suffer himself to be couched; and if you struggle to perform the operation that is to do him good against his will, it is odds but you blind him for life."

Helen could not, however, understand how Granville could have been so completely deceived, except that it had been impossible for him to imagine the exquisite meanness of that man's mind.

"There," cried Beauclerc, "you see my fault was having too little, instead of too much imagination."

Lady Davenant smiled, and said, "It has been admirably observed, that 'it is among men as among certain tribes of animals, it is sometimes only necessary that one of the herd should step forward and lead the way, to make all the others follow with alacrity and submission;' * and I solve the whole difficulty thus: I suppose that Lord Beltravers, just following Beauclerc's lead, succeeded in persuading him that he was a man of genius and a noble fellow, by allowing all Beauclerc's own paradoxes, adopting all his ultra-original opinions, and, in short, sending him back the image of his own mind, till Granville had been caught by it, and had fairly fallen in love with it—a mental metaphysical Narcissus.

"After all," continued Lady Davenant, smiling, "of all the follies of youth, the dangerous folly of trying to

* Lord Mahon.

do good—that for which you stand convicted, may be the most easily pardoned, the most safely left to time and experience to cure. You know, Granville, that ever since the time of Alexander the Great's great tutor, the characteristic faults of youth and age have been the '*too much*' and the '*too little.*' In youth, the too much confidence in others and in themselves, the too much of enthusiasm—too much of benevolence;—in age, alas! too little. And with this youth, who has the *too much* in everything—what shall we do with him, Helen? Take him, for better for worse, you must; and I must love him as I have done from his childhood, a little while longer—to the end of my life."

"A little longer, to the end of her life!" said Beauclerc to himself, as leaning on the back of Helen's chair he looked at Lady Davenant. "I cannot believe that she whom I see before me is passing away, to be with us but a little longer; so full of life as she appears; such energy divine! No, no, she will live, live long!"

And as his eyes looked that hope, Helen caught it, and yet she doubted, and sighed, but still she had hope. Cecilia had none; she was sitting behind her mother; she looked up at Helen, and shook her head; she had seen more of her mother's danger, she had been with her in nights of fearful struggle. She had been with her just after she had written to Lord Davenant what she must have felt to be a farewell letter—a letter, too, which contained the whole history of Cecilia's deception and Helen's difficulties, subjects so agitating that the writing of them had left her mother in such a state of exhaustion that Cecilia could think only with terror for her, yet she exerted all her power over herself to hide her anguish, not only for her mother's but for Helen's sake.

The preparations for the wedding went on, pressed forward by Lady Davenant as urgently as the general

could desire. The bridesmaids were to be Lady Emily Greville's younger sister, Lady Susan, and, at Helen's particular request, Miss Clarendon. Full of joy, wonder, and sympathy, in wedding haste Miss Clarendon and Mrs Pennant arrived, both delighted that it was all happily settled for Helen: which most, it was scarcely possible to say; but which most curious as to the means by which it had been settled, it was very possible to see. When Miss Clarendon had secured a private moment with Helen, she began.

"Now tell me—tell me everything about yourself."

Helen could only repeat what the general had already written to her sister—that he was now convinced that the reports concerning Miss Stanley were false, his esteem restored, his public approbation to be given, Beauclerc satisfied, and her rejection honourably retracted.

"I will ask you no more, Helen, by word or look," said Esther; "I understand it all, my brother and Lady Cecilia are separated for life. And now let us go to Aunt Pennant: she will not annoy you by her curiosity, but how she will be able to manage her sympathy amongst you with these crossing demands I know not; Lady Cecilia's wretchedness will almost spoil my aunt's joy for you—it cannot be pure joy."

Pure joy! how far from it Helen's sigh told; and Miss Clarendon had scarcely patience enough with Lady Cecilia to look at her again; had scarcely seconded, at least with good grace, a suggestion of Mrs Pennant's that they should prevail on Lady Cecilia to take a turn in the park with them, she looked so much in want of fresh air.

"We can go now, my dear Esther, you know, before it is time for that picture sale, at which you are to be before two o'clock." Lady Davenant desired Cecilia to go. "Helen will be with me, do, my dear Cecilia, go."

She went, and before the awkwardness of Miss Clarendon's silence ceased, and before Mrs Pennant had settled which glass or which blind was best up or down, Lady Cecilia burst into tears, thanked Aunt Pennant for her sympathy, and now, above the fear of Miss Clarendon—above all fear but that of doing further wrong by concealment, she at once told the whole truth, that they might, as well as the general, do full justice to Helen, and that they might never, never blame Clarendon for the separation which was to be.

That he should have mentioned nothing of her conduct even to his sister, was not surprising. "I know his generous nature," said Cecilia.

"But I never knew yours till this moment, Cecilia," cried Miss Clarendon, embracing her; "my sister, now —separation or not."

"But there need be no separation," said kind Aunt Pennant.

Cecilia sighed, and Miss Clarendon repeated, "You will find in me a sister at all events."

She now saw Cecilia as she really was—faults and virtues. Perhaps, indeed, in this moment of revulsion of feeling, in the surprise of gratified confidence, she overvalued Lady Cecilia's virtues, and was inclined to do her more than justice, in her eagerness to make generous reparation for unjust suspicion.

Chapter xlvij.

AFTER setting down Lady Cecilia at her mother's, the aunt and niece proceeded to the picture sale which Miss Clarendon was eager to attend, as she was in search of a pendant to a famous Berghem she possessed; and while she was considering the

picture, she had the advantage of hearing a story, which seemed, indeed, to be told for the amusement of the whole room, by a party of fashionables who were standing near her:—a wonderful story of a locket, which was going about; it was variously told, but all agreed in one point—that a young married lady of high rank had never dared to appear in the world since her husband had seen this locket in her hands—it had brought out something—something which had occurred before marriage;—and here mysterious nods were interchanged.

Another version stated that the story had not yet been fully explained to the husband, that he had found the locket on the table in a room that he had suddenly entered, where he discovered her kneeling to the person in question—"the person in question" being sometimes a woman and sometimes a man.

Then leaned forward, stretching her scraggy neck, one who had good reason to believe that the husband would soon speak out—the public would soon hear of a separation: and everybody must be satisfied that there could not be a separation without good grounds.

Miss Clarendon inquired from a gentleman near them, who the lady was with the outstretched scraggy neck—Lady Katrine Hawksby.

Miss Clarendon knew her only by reputation. She did not know Miss Clarendon either by reputation or by sight; and she went on to say, she would "venture any wager that the separation would take place within a month. In short, there could be no doubt that before marriage"—and she ended with a look which gave a deathblow to the reputation.

Exceedingly shocked, Miss Clarendon, not only from a sense of justice to Lady Cecilia, but from feeling for her brother's honour, longed to reply in defence; but she constrained herself for once, and

having been assured by Lady Cecilia that all had been confessed to her mother, she thought that Lady Davenant must be the best person to decide what should be done. She went to her house immediately, sent in word that she begged to see Lady Davenant for two or three minutes alone, was admitted; Cecilia immediately vacated the chair beside her mother's bed, and left the room. Miss Clarendon felt some difficulty in beginning, but she forced herself to repeat all she had heard. Then Lady Davenant started up in her bed, and the colour of life spread over her face—

"Thank you, thank you, Miss Clarendon! a second time I have to thank you for an inestimable service. It is well for Cecilia that she made the whole truth known to us both—made you her friend; now we *can* act for her. I will have that locket from Madame de St Cymon before the sun goes down."

Now Lady Davenant had Madame de St Cymon completely in her power, from her acquaintance with a disgraceful transaction which had come to her knowledge at Florence. The locket was surrendered, returned with humble assurances that Madame de St Cymon now perfectly understood the thing in its true light, and was quite convinced it had been stolen, not given. Lady Davenant glanced over her note with scorn, and was going to throw it from her into the fire, but did not. When Miss Clarendon called upon her again that evening as she had appointed, she showed it to her, and desired that she would, when her brother arrived next day, tell him what she had heard, what Lady Davenant had done, and how the locket was now in her possession.

Some people who pretend to know, maintain that the passion of love is of such an all-engrossing nature that it swallows up every other feeling; but we who judge more justly of our kind, hold differently, and

rather believe that love in generous natures imparts a strengthening power, a magnetic touch, to every good feeling. Helen was incapable of being perfectly happy while her friend was miserable; and even Beauclerc, in spite of all the suffering she had caused, could not help pitying Lady Cecilia, and he heartily wished the general could be reconciled to her; yet it was a matter in which he could not properly interfere; he did not attempt it.

Lady Davenant determined to give a breakfast to all the bridal party after the marriage. In her state of health, Helen and Cecilia remonstrated, but Lady Davenant had resolved upon it, and at last they agreed it would be better than parting at the church door—better that she should at her own house take leave of Helen and Beauclerc, who would set out immediately after the breakfast for Thorndale.

And now equipages were finished, and wedding paraphernalia sent home—the second time that wedding dresses had been furnished for Miss Stanley;—and never once were these looked at by the bride elect, nor even by Cecilia, but to see that all was as it should be—that seen, she sighed and passed on.

Felicie's ecstasies were no more to be heard: we forgot to mention that she had, before Helen's return from Llansillen, departed, dismissed in disgrace; and happy was it for Lady Cecilia and Helen to be relieved from her jabbering, and not exposed to her spying and reporting. Nevertheless, the gloom that hung over the world above could not but be observed by the world below; it was, however, naturally accounted for by Lady Davenant's state of health, and by the anxiety which Lady Cecilia must feel for the general, who, as it had been officially announced by Mr Cockburn, was to set out on foreign service the day after the marriage.

Lady Cecilia, notwithstanding the bright hopeful-

ness of her temper, and her habits of sanguine belief that all would end well in which she and her good fortune had any concern, seemed now, in this respect, to have changed her nature; and ever since her husband's denunciations, had continued quite resigned to misery, and submissive to the fate which she thought she had deserved. She was much employed in attendance upon her mother, and thankful that she was so permitted to be. She never mentioned her husband's name, and if she alluded to him, or to what had been decreed by him, it was with an emotion that scarcely dared to touch the point. She spoke most of her child, and seemed to look to the care of him as her only consolation. The boy had been brought from Kensington for Lady Davenant to see, and was now at her house. Cecilia once said she thought he was very like his father, and hoped that he would at least take leave of his boy at the last. To that last hour—that hour when she was to see her husband once more, when they were to meet but to part, to meet first at the wedding ceremony, and at a breakfast in a public company—altogether painful as it must be, yet she looked forward to it with a sort of longing, ardent impatience. "True, it will be dreadful, yet still—still I shall see him again, see him once again, and he cannot part with his once so dear Cecilia without some word—some look, different from his last."

The evening before the day on which the wedding was to be, Lady Cecilia was in Lady Davenant's room, sitting beside the bed while her mother slept. Suddenly she was startled from her still and ever the same recurring train of melancholy thoughts, by a sound which had often made her heart beat with joy—her husband's knock; she ran to the window, opened it, and was out on the balcony in an instant. His horse was at the door, he had alighted, and was going up the

steps; she leaned over the rails of the balcony, and as she leaned, a flower she wore broke off—it fell at the general's feet: he looked up and their eyes met. There he stood, waiting on those steps, some minutes, for an answer to his inquiry how Lady Davenant was: and when the answer was brought out by Elliott, whom, as it seemed, he had desired to see, he remounted his horse, and rode away without ever again looking up to the balcony.

Lady Davenant had awakened, and when Cecilia returned on hearing her voice, her mother, as the light from the half-open shutters shone upon her face, saw that she was in tears; she kneeled down by the side of the bed, and wept bitterly; she made her mother understand how it had been.

"Not that I hoped more, but still—still to feel it so! Oh! mother, I am bitterly punished."

Then Lady Davenant seizing those clasped hands, and raising herself in her bed, fixed her eyes earnestly upon Cecilia, and asked—

"Would you, Cecilia—tell me, would you, if it were now, this moment, in your power—would you retract your confession?"

"Retract! impossible!"

"Do you repent—regret having made it, Cecilia?"

"Repent—regret having made it? No, mother, no!" replied Cecilia firmly. "I only regret that it was not sooner made. Retract!—impossible I could wish to retract the only right thing I have done, the only thing that redeems me in my inmost soul from uttermost contempt. No! rather would I be as I am, and lose that noble heart, than hold it as I did unworthily. There is, mother, as you said—as I feel, a sustaining—a redeeming power in truth."

Her mother threw her arms round her.

"Come to my heart, my child, close—close to my

heart. Heaven bless you! You have my blessing—my thanks, Cecilia. Yes, my thanks—for now I know—I feel, my dear daughter, that my neglect of you in childhood has been repaired. You make me forgive myself, you make me happy, you have my thanks—my blessing—my warmest blessing!"

A smile of delight was on her pale face, and tears ran down as Cecilia answered—"Oh, mother, mother! blind that I have been. Why did not I sooner know this tenderness of your heart?"

"And why, my child, did I not sooner know you? The fault was mine, the suffering has been yours—not yours alone, though."

"Suffer no more for me, mother, for now, after this, come what may, I can bear it. I can be happy, even if——" There she paused, and then eagerly looking into her mother's eyes she asked—

"What do you say, mother, about him? do you think I may hope?"

"I dare not bid you hope," replied her mother.

"Do you bid me despair?"

"No, despair in this world is only for those who have lost their own esteem, who have no confidence in themselves, for those who cannot repent, reform, and trust. My child, you must not despair. Now leave me to myself," continued she. "Open a little more of the shutter, and put that book within my reach."

As soon as Miss Clarendon heard that her brother had arrived in town she hastened to him, and, as Lady Davenant had desired, told him of all the reports that were in circulation, and of all that Lady Cecilia had spontaneously confided to her. Esther watched his countenance as she spoke, and observed that he listened with eager attention to the proofs of exactness in Cecilia; but he said nothing, and whatever his feelings were, his determination, she could not doubt, was still

unshaken; even she did not dare to press his confidence.

Miss Clarendon reported to Lady Davenant that she had obeyed her command, and she described as nearly as she could all that she thought her brother's countenance expressed. Lady Davenant seemed satisfied, and this night she slept, as she told Cecilia in the morning, better than she had done since she returned to England. And this was the day of trial——

The hour came, and Lady Davenant was in the church with her daughter. The marriage was to be, as described in olden times, "celebrated with all the lustre and pomp imaginable;" and so it was, for Helen's sake, Helen, the pale bride——

"Beautiful!" the whispers ran as she appeared, "but too pale." Leaning on General Clarendon's arm she was led up the aisle to the altar. He felt the tremor of her arm on his, but she looked composed and almost firm. She saw no one individual of the assembled numbers, not even Cecilia or Lady Davenant. She knelt at the altar beside him to whom she was to give her faith, and General Clarendon, in the face of all the world, proudly gave her to his ward, and she, without fear, low and distinctly pronounced the sacred vow. And as Helen rose from her knees, the sun shone out, and a ray of light was on her face, and it was lovely. Every heart said so—every heart but Lady Katrine Hawksby's—And why do we think of her at such a moment? and why does Lady Davenant think of her at such a moment? Yet she did; she looked to see if she were present, and she bade her to the breakfast.

And now all the salutations were given and received, and all the murmur of congratulations rising, the living tide poured out of the church; and then the noise of carriages, and all drove off to Lady Davenant's; and

Lady Davenant had gone through it all so far, well. And Lady Cecilia knew that it had been; and her eyes had been upon her husband, and her heart had been full of another day when she had knelt beside him at the altar. And did he, too, think of that day? She could not tell, his countenance discovered no emotion, his eyes never once turned to the place where she stood. And she was now to see him for one hour, but one hour longer, and at a public breakfast! but still she was to see him.

And now they are all at breakfast. The attention of some was upon the bride and bridegroom; of others, on Lady Cecilia and on the general; of others, on Lady Davenant; and of many, on themselves. Lady Davenant had Beauclerc on one side, General Clarendon on the other, and her daughter opposite to him. Lady Katrine was there, with her "*tristeful* visage," as Churchill justly called it, and more *tristeful* it presently became.

When breakfast was over, seizing her moment when conversation flagged, and when there was a pause, implying, "What is to be said or done next?" Lady Davenant rose from her seat with an air of preparation, and somewhat of solemnity.—All eyes were instantly upon her. She drew out a locket, which she held up to public view; then, turning to Lady Katrine Hawksby, she said—"This bauble has been much talked of, I understand, by your ladyship, but I question whether you have ever yet seen it, or know the truth concerning it. This locket was *stolen* by a worthless man, given by him to a worthless woman, from whom I have obtained it; and now I give it to the person for whom it was originally destined."

She advanced towards Helen and put it round her neck. This done, her colour flitted—her hand was suddenly pressed to her heart; yet she commanded—

absolutely commanded, the paroxysm of pain. The general was at her side; her daughter, Helen, and Beauclerc, were close to her instantly. She was just able to walk: she slowly left the room—and was no more seen by the world!

She suffered herself to be carried up the steps into her own apartment by the general, who laid her on the sofa in her dressing-room. She looked round on them, and saw that all were there whom she loved; but there was an alteration in her appearance which struck them all, and most the general, who had least expected it. She held out her hand to him, and fixing her eyes upon him with deathful expression, calmly smiled, and said—"You would not believe this could be; but now you see it must be, and soon. We have no time to lose," continued she, and moving very cautiously and feebly, she half-raised herself.—"Yes," said she, "a moment is granted to me, thank Heaven!" She rose with sudden power and threw herself on her knees at the general's feet: it was done before he could stop her.

"For God's sake!" cried he, "Lady Davenant! —I conjure you——"

She would not be raised. "No," said she, "here I die, if I appeal to you in vain—to your justice, General Clarendon, to which, as far as I know, none ever appealed in vain—and shall I be the first?—a mother for her child—a dying mother for your wife—for my dear Cecilia, once dear to you."

His face was instantly covered with his hands.

"Not to your love," continued she—"if that be gone—to your justice I appeal, and MUST be heard, if you are what I think you: if you are not, why, go—go, instantly—go, and leave your wife, innocent as she is, to be deemed guilty—Part from her, at the moment when the only fault she committed has been repaired—Throw her from you when, by the sacrifice of all that

was dear to her, she has proved her truth — Yes, you know that she has spoken the whole, the perfect truth——"

"I know it," exclaimed he.

"Give her up to the whole world of slanderers!—destroy her character! If now her husband separate from her, her good name is lost for ever! If now her husband protect her not——"

Her husband turned, and clasped her in his arms. Lady Davenant rose and blessed him—blessed them both: they knelt beside her, and she joined their hands.

"Now," said she, "I give my daughter to a husband worthy of her, and she more worthy of that noble heart than when first his. Her only fault was mine—my early neglect: it is repaired—I die in peace! You make my last moments the happiest! Helen, my dearest Helen, now, and not till now, happy—perfectly happy in Love and Truth!"

THE END.

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